

# THE INVESTIGATORS in

## *THE TRAIL OF THE BOUNTY HUNTER*





in

**THE TRAIL  
OF THE  
BOUNTY HUNTER**

By chance, Pete overhears his school teacher on a phone conversation discussing a seemingly dubious activity involving the use of weapons. As a conscientious investigator, he follows the teacher and gets drawn into an abduction. With limited leads, Jupiter and Bob desperately try to locate their friend. In the process, The Three Investigators face numerous obstacles and get entangled with unscrupulous people. At one point, the three of them are separated, each making his way on a wild ride to northern California.

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Trail of the Bounty Hunter

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## **Contents**

- 1. A Case for Pete**
- 2. The Horror in Pink**
- 3. Bail Enforcement**
- 4. The Trail of a Crime**
- 5. A Long Journey Ahead**
- 6. Unravelling Clues From Pete**
- 7. Caught Red-Handed!**
- 8. Bounty Hunting**
- 9. More Clues From Pete**
- 10. Jupiter's Warning**
- 11. "Silence is Blood-Red"**
- 12. Equation With Three Unknowns**
- 13. The Interrogation**
- 14. Car Chase Along a Country Road**
- 15. Ruthless Snake**
- 16. Burning Dawn**
- 17. *Western Revenge...* In Real Life**
- 18. The Aftermath**
- Addendum**

## 1. A Case for Pete

“You are in big trouble!”

Pete Crenshaw swallowed. “Isn’t that a bit exaggerated?”

Mrs de Bruijn adjusted her bright red glasses. “I never exaggerate. I am a school counsellor. My job is to tell you the situation. It’s not nice, but it has to be done. Your grades are very bad.”

“I passed the last maths test,” Pete objected, “and I’m very good at sport.”

“So am I—for over forty years.” Mrs de Bruijn moved slightly, her health shoes making squeaking noises on the floor. “—But it’s not enough to throw a ball here, swing a bat there and run around frantically. For a sports scholarship, you need a sport you excel at—not ten that you are just pretty good at. Alternatively, you need to present something more unusual—cheerleading or figure skating instead of basketball—to give you some examples.”

“But—” Pete continued, but the counsellor did not let him finish.

“You don’t belong to a minority, you come from shockingly normal backgrounds and you don’t have an extraordinary story.”

“My friends and I work very successfully as investigators outside school!” With a new surge of confidence, Pete handed the counsellor a business card. It said:



“In fact, such voluntary work goes down well with colleges and universities,” Mrs de Bruijn admitted, but was unimpressed. “However, Jupiter Jones and Bob Andrews not only convict criminals, they also have good grades. You, on the other hand, had better do more for school. School is work!”

“I could, after all—”

“You could ask for an extra assignment in literature. That would have an impact on your grade.”

Pete groaned. “I can’t do that. I already have to read a whole book and then write a paper after that.”

“An assignment based on a whole book?” asked Mrs de Bruijn. Her left eye twitched. “Would the book be one that has no pictures?”

“It’s a very thick book,” Pete defended himself. “Really! I could just train harder for basketball, couldn’t I?” He nervously smoothed out his Rocky Beach High School sports shirt.

“How about mathematics? I see a need to catch up there as well. A few extra tasks wouldn’t hurt you.”

“Miss Blunt won’t give me a chance—guaranteed!” exclaimed Pete. “She’s always overwhelming us with things you never need in life.”

“Addition, subtraction, and that sort of thing?” asked Mrs de Bruijn.

“Equations,” Pete said. He was no longer sure if Mrs de Bruijn took him seriously. “In any case, hardly anyone in my class can keep up with that. Besides, she doesn’t like me.”

“Amanda Blunt is an excellent teacher. She is strict and has high expectations, but at least you will learn something from her. If extra maths doesn’t suit you, you can start on the cheerleading squad straight away on Monday.”

“Cheerleading?” Pete repeated in aghast. “As far as I know, we have an all-girl cheerleading team!”

“That’s where you can stand out,” Mrs de Bruijn added. “The team is short-handed right now and I’m sure they’ll be happy to get more members.”

“No way!” Pete cried.

“—Or you can do additional tasks.” Mrs de Bruijn closed the file that lay on the table in front of her. Then she looked at her watch. “With a bit of luck, you can still catch Miss Blunt.”

“The applications for university are still ages away. I have plenty of time.”

“—But I don’t.” Mrs de Bruijn stood up. “My office is closing now. I answer college-related questions on Wednesdays and Fridays... any other problems daily—during breaks.” She pointed to the notice board hanging beside the door. Alongside bold illustrations, energetically underlined capital letters proclaimed everything that fell within the counsellor’s remit—from ‘drug addiction’ to ‘heartbreak’.

“No need to,” Pete said quickly. He jumped up, grabbed his backpack and hurried to the door. “Thank you, and have a nice weekend.”

Pete’s legs felt like lead. The last steps to Miss Blunt’s classroom felt like the way to his own execution. A conversation with her would definitely cost Pete the last bit of good humour.

He fervently hoped that the teacher had already called it a day. Additional tasks in mathematics did not suit Pete at all. He had a weekend of beach parties, surfing and dates ahead of him. On top of that, his parents were away for two days. There was simply no room for maths.

The thought of cheerleading, however, made his throat tighten even more. His girlfriend, Kelly Madigan, was the leader of the team. This would not go well. On top of that, practice times overlapped with basketball.

Pete had to bite the bullet. He took a deep breath and marched courageously to the door. It was ajar. Cautiously, Pete peered into the room.

“Yeah, I know that, but I’m now at school!” That was clearly Miss Blunt. She spoke coolly and very clearly—as always, but there was still something unfamiliar in her voice. Was it anger? Or fear?

Pete entered the classroom. It was empty. Apparently Miss Blunt was having the conversation in the tiny teaching resource room behind the whiteboard. He peered at the door, which was usually closed, but now, it was open.

“I know! But that was before,” exclaimed Miss Blunt. “Now I have a decent job as a school teacher. I don’t want to risk that and—” She broke off in mid-sentence, though no response could be heard.



Pete concluded that it was a phone call and most certainly, it was a private conversation. It was none of his business. After all, it was better not to talk to Miss Blunt until Monday. Then he wouldn't have to do the extra work over the weekend. He had so much other things to do! Slowly he took a step backwards.

Miss Blunt's voice was suddenly very quiet. "Yes, I still have the equipment, but I don't carry it around with me... or do you think I need weapons in class?"

Weapons? Now Pete listened up. Had his maths teacher really just said that?

"By the way, why can't you do the job yourself? ... At least six hours? I see... so you cannot make it in time..." There was a pause before she continued: "Okay, okay, I'll do it. One last job—just this one last time. After that, don't ever call me again, understand?"

There was silence for a moment. Then she continued: "No, he won't get a chance to fight back. The main thing is that there is no interference from passers-by playing the hero... Oh, that's good. I tell you what—I'll go home and print everything out. Then I pack the equipment and head for Port Hueneme. Do you want me to make the call as well?"

Pete involuntarily took another step back. He didn't need to be an investigator to realize that this was some crooked business.

"Okay, I'll handle that myself," Miss Blunt said after a little pause. "—But where do we meet? ... Yes, I know that. A house number would be useful... Wait, I'll write it down quickly... I should be able to find it... Of course I understand it is urgent." She snorted. "You can thank me later!"

The conversation was over! Pete had to get out of the room immediately! As silently as possible, he scurried into the corridor. Now, he had to hide! He had to inform Jupiter and Bob! He had to go after Miss Blunt! He had to prevent a crime! But first, he had to go to the toilet! He had drunk too much water after basketball practice.

Pete decided to sprint to the toilet. It was diagonally opposite and was the only hiding place around here anyway.

In no time at all, Pete disappeared behind the toilet door. He would give Miss Blunt a little head start. Since there was only one way to the school car park, he couldn't miss her outside—at least not if he hurried.

When he jogged outside a little later, Miss Blunt was already heading for the teachers' car park. Her wine-red jacket and knee-length skirt fluttered in the wind, while her ash-blonde hair sat like concrete—tied into a tight knot from which no strand could escape.

She stopped at a small car—a Chevy Spark sub-compact hatchback—whose paintwork perfectly matched her jacket. The car reminded Pete of a grape—a red wine grape. Miss Blunt swiftly put her bag in the boot, opened the driver's door and got in.

Pete had no idea where Miss Blunt lived. It might not even be in Rocky Beach! If he didn't want to blow this case, he had to pursue her.

## 2. The Horror in Pink

“What on earth is that?” Bob Andrews blinked and pushed up his sunglasses. He stared in amazement at a monstrosity of a pink can. In fact, Bob thought that it remotely resembled an oversized marshmallow.

“A car,” Jupiter Jones replied, “or rather, my car.”

The two boys had gone straight after school to The Jones Salvage Yard, a business owned and operated by Jupiter’s uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda. Besides selling junk stuff, they also had all sorts of second-hand items including antiques and curiosities.

Many years ago, after the death of Jupiter’s parents, his uncle and aunt took him in and raised him here. Over time, the salvage yard had also become a second home for his friends, Pete and Bob—with the three of them being members of the investigation agency known as The Three Investigators.

The three boys had set up their agency’s headquarters in an old mobile home trailer located within the premises of the salvage yard. The trailer was hidden from outsiders by a huge pile of scrap metal and junk, and it could only be accessed through secret entrances. Over time, the three of them had accumulated items and furniture to make the trailer a fully-functional office consisting of computer and communications systems, electrical and electronic gadgets, a small crime laboratory, and cabinets housing records of their past cases.

Now, however, Jupiter and Bob were not in their trailer, but standing in an area of the yard that served as a workshop for machinery repair and service.

“I’m sure Pete will have some tips on how I can make this thing tick.” Jupiter rubbed his hands together in glee.

“You can’t be serious, Jupe.” Bob circled the boxy vehicle that resembled a strange cross between a van and a surfer bus. It was an old model GMC vehicle with heavy signs of use. The lettering ‘Pizzy’s Partymobile’ glistened on the side and a pink-painted bull bar was emblazoned in front of the radiator grille.

“It’s a V6 conversion van,” said the First Investigator, “with a fold-out table inside.”

Bob sighed. “Since when are you interested in cars? And more importantly, since when do you buy a ramshackle thing like this without first asking Pete or Ty for advice?” Bob was referring to Ty Cassey, a distant cousin of Jupiter, and who was a car enthusiast and talented mechanic.

“Aunt Mathilda has once again forbidden me to ride my motorbike. For an investigator, however, a vehicle is essential.” Jupiter avoided his friend’s critical gaze.

A car of his own had been his fervent wish for a long time. That’s why he wasn’t going to let anyone talk him out of this. “The seller gave me a spectacular price, and I couldn’t refuse the offer,” Jupe continued. “In fact, acquaintances of Uncle Titus wanted to use this as a vehicle for their band, but then they found a bigger one.”

“A better one, you mean,” Bob countered.

Jupe pulled open the side door and presented the interior. Bob could see that it was very much modified. At the centre were two seats facing each other, a folding table between them, and a worn drawer cabinet right next to it. At the back was a garishly upholstered back seat for four, with half-open compartments under the seat. Behind the back seat was a plush cover

—presumably for a storage compartment. There were strange smells seemingly from different scented candles.

“Since this is a party machine, the disco sound system is still working fine,” Jupe said.

“Talk about bells and whistles,” Bob remarked.

“You know what?” Jupe said. “I could get this fixed up to be our mobile headquarters. That way we could hold meetings away from our regular office, for instance, when we are on the road.”

“Really?” Bob asked. “With a colour like that, crooks and burglars will run away as soon as they see this thing coming.”

“On the contrary, that would even be a perfect camouflage,” Jupe countered. “Nobody would suspect that this is our vehicle.”

“Ha! Wanna bet?” Bob said. “Within a week, the whole of Rocky Beach would know, and sooner or later, even the whole of Southern California! Hey, I can compose a jingle for you to play on the sound system—‘When the Pink Partymobile’s here, The Three Investigators are near!’”

“Well, we could still change the outer appearance,” Jupe argued.

“You want a camouflage? When Pete comes, how about we spray-paint this thing and change the wordings on the side to... say... ‘Junkyard Jupe’s Jalopy’?”

“Very funny,” Jupe said. “Talking about Pete, where is he?”

Suddenly, his mobile phone rang. The First Investigator pulled it out of his pocket and answered the call. “Hey, Pete! We’re waiting for you.”

He listened briefly, then interrupted his friend. “Hold on, I’ll put you on speaker. Pete, can you repeat the information for Bob?”

“I’m in a hurry!” Pete’s voice rang out. There were crackling and rustling on the line.

“Pete overheard a suspicious conversation at school just now,” Jupiter said, bringing Bob up to speed. “Then he followed his teacher.”

“Yes!” cried Pete impatiently. “Miss Blunt has been given an assignment. Clearly a criminal matter—an abduction, maybe even a murder. That’s why she refused at first. It sounded like she used to be a member of a gang.”

“Miss Blunt?” asked Bob incredulously. “She’s all fussy and small-minded. I bet she wouldn’t even stop in a no-parking zone.”

“Now you listen to me!” demanded Pete. “She’s in her house right now packing weapons for the job!”

“Where are you?” Jupe asked.

“Still in Rocky Beach—135 San Pedro Street. I’m parked close by. When she comes out, I’ll follow her. Her destination is Port Hueneme.”

“The place is near Oxnard, about 45 minutes from here, up the coast road,” Jupiter said, “but Pete, are you sure there’s a case? You don’t like Miss Blunt, possibly—”

“Jupe, she’s involved in some dubious activity! She was talking about weapons. Do you want me to let her get away just because I happen to not like her?”

“No way.” Jupiter looked at Bob. “We will arrange for backup. Please activate the tracking function on your phone for Bob and me. Then we can see exactly where you are—”

“Wait! She’s coming out!” Pete’s voice sounded rough. “She brought out two black bags. There could easily be a rifle in there, maybe even more than one.”

“Do you notice anything else?”

“Not yet,” Pete said. “She’s locking the front door. I’ve gotta hang up now because my phone battery is low.”

“Don’t forget to activate tracking.”

"I will," Pete promised. "Call you later!" Then he hastily ended the connection.

"Miss Blunt is supposed to be a criminal?" Bob laughed out. "Maybe she was just invited to play paintball. I bet it's all quite harmless."

Jupiter leaned thoughtfully against his new car. "That may be. However, we should also consider the possibility that our Second Investigator is currently thwarting the plans of real criminals."

He looked at his phone and tapped away at the screen. "Tracking is active. I'd say we're going for a test drive now."

"You mean you haven't driven this thing yet?" Bob asked.

"Of course I have," Jupe said, "but only for five minutes... and now, it's 'Destination—Port Hueneme'!"

Pete was crouched behind a bush. He had his binoculars with him and had just lowered it to get a better overview.

At that moment, Miss Blunt walked to the back of her car to place the two black bags into the boot. Pete quickly peered through the binoculars again and frantically turned the focus knob. Due to the distance, the image remained slightly blurred, but it was enough to clearly see Miss Blunt, although she hardly resembled the teacher from school.

She had exchanged her jacket and skirt for black jeans, a sleeveless top and a bulletproof vest. She also wore sunglasses and a black baseball cap under which she hid her ash blonde hair. Her belt, to which several objects were attached, was conspicuous.

Pete narrowed his eyes, but he couldn't tell if they were weapons or tools. What was certain was that this was not how one dressed for a school conference, but rather for a large-scale operation at a drug lord's hide-out... or—at least if Pete had his way—for a fight against an army of zombies, hostile mutants or cyborgs from the future. If the end of the world was imminent, Miss Blunt was perfectly dressed for it.

Before Pete could take a closer look at the unusual outfit, the teacher got into her small car. It no longer suited her at all. Pete almost expected the little grape to turn into a black squad car, but nothing of the sort happened. The teacher's car rolled away, small and red as ever.

It's high time for Pete to return to his MG!

Pete steered his MG onto the coastal road heading west. Normally, the Second Investigator enjoyed this route especially when he had a surfboard stowed on the narrow back seat and a summer hit in his ear. Now there was only one thing—a queasy feeling in his stomach.

The Second Investigator switched on the radio. The radio presenter promised a particularly beautiful, sunny weekend: "Southern California, just as we love it. Perfect spring weather with a light breeze. Ideal conditions for the surfers among you. So grab your boards and look for the ultimate wave. Now, we'll play the perfect song for you—*Ocean Love* by Sandy Shore."

"Tomorrow I'll be there too!" Pete said loudly. He cast a longing glance at the sea. The scenery was impressive. The Pacific shimmered in the warm evening light—a dream for those who had gone sailing, surfing or swimming today. Then Pete recollected himself and focussed on his driving.

However, the good mood did not last long. Just past Malibu, the needle on the fuel gauge had slipped into the red zone. The MG was demanding fuel. The Second Investigator had no choice but to head for the nearest petrol station.

Nervously, he parked the car next to a petrol pump, jumped out, slid his bank card into the machine and grabbed the fuel nozzle. Pete felt as if the digits on the digital display were moving extra slowly today. It took an eternity to fill the tank. Miss Blunt's car should be long gone by now.

Pete took a deep breath. The only direct route to Port Hueneme was the coastal road. That made things easier, at least if the Second Investigator managed to catch up with the teacher before arriving in the small city.

He jumped into the MG and started the engine. Soon a traffic light appeared in front of him. Pete stepped on the accelerator. The MG growled ungraciously, but just managed to whiz under the yellow lights. He overtook a truck and a bus. It was hard not to exceed the speed limit while doing so. Pete could only hope that Miss Blunt followed the rules of the road as seriously as the rules of the school, otherwise he would not be able to catch up with her.

"Where is Pete now?" asked Jupiter tensely. He sat behind the wheel of his new car and tried unsuccessfully to accelerate. Bob felt that the vehicle was slower than a skate scooter. As it was, every traffic light in front of them was red.

Bob glanced at his mobile phone. "Pete had just gone past Point Mugu."

"Good."

"Not good if you don't step on it!" admonished Bob.

"I'm going full throttle," Jupiter defended himself. "This car just shows a certain unwillingness to cooperate with me."

"We should have cycled here," Bob muttered.

"I'm going to assume you were joking," Jupiter's voice sounded pressed. "—But I admit that we weren't judicious in our choice of vehicle."

"We?" Bob argued. "You mean you weren't judicious in your choice of vehicle."

"Okay, okay..." Jupe said placatingly. "Your Beetle would have been more suitable for the mission."

Bob decided to keep quiet for a while and let Jupe focus on driving. At least they were now on the Pacific Coast Highway. Just then, they were overtaken by a Jeep with a horse trailer. Jupe showed himself from an unusually helpless side. He was of high intelligence, he could think incredibly fast and had a phenomenal memory. However, he had little practice as a driver and the Partymobile seemed to be a treacherous vehicle to boot.

Finally, Bob spoke up: "Do you think Pete is in danger?"

Jupiter hesitated. "We have too few reliable facts to assess the situation. If an action with the use of weapons is planned, a threat cannot be ruled out."

Bob sighed. "In other words, Pete is in danger."

"He could be in danger," Jupiter interjected, "depending on what Miss Blunt is planning. I haven't had her in class so far and can't draw on any experience of my own. What do you think of her?"

"She takes the maths course very seriously. Half the students barely keep up," Bob summarized. "She is extremely strict, puts a lot of emphasis on discipline and acts like a governess from the century before last. She is in her mid-thirties at the most, but wears clothes like an older lady. She never talks about her private life. As far as I know, she hasn't lived in Rocky Beach for long... Hold on!" Bob had looked at his mobile again. "Pete has just turned off the Pacific Coast Highway onto Hueneme Road towards Port Hueneme."

### 3. Bail Enforcement

The sun was already setting. Relieved, the Second Investigator had managed to catch up with his teacher's small wine-red car but he maintained a distance far enough not to draw her attention. As expected Miss Blunt turned left into the outskirts of Port Hueneme. Pete followed suit.

Although the Pacific Ocean was close by, this neighbourhood was a dreary mix of industrial buildings, grey warehouses, vacant lots and half-finished houses.

The small car came to a halt on a road along a row of newly constructed shells of houses. Was she already at her destination here? Pete slowed down but did not stop. Under no circumstances could he risk being noticed by the teacher. He had to find another place to park.

Pete steered the MG behind a building waste container and glanced at his car's clock. With luck, Jupiter and Bob would show up in a moment. As a team, they were unbeatable. However, he couldn't wait for them. He couldn't let Miss Blunt out of his sight so he had to keep following her.

When Pete looked around the container, the teacher had already got out. He could just see her in a crouched position moving past a few houses ahead and then disappearing into one. In her hand, she held something that looked very much like a gun. No doubt about it—this was serious!

Pete felt that he should have earlier called Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach Police Department. Even though the inspector wasn't responsible for Port Hueneme, he knew The Three Investigators well enough to take their leads seriously.

The Second Investigator hesitated. Should he go after his teacher? Create a diversion? Or go for help? But who could help him here? The construction workers had already finished work and there were no neighbours in sight.

Pete pulled out his mobile phone. He needed good advice, and only one person could give it—Jupiter Jones.

The display showed three missed calls from Pete's girlfriend Kelly Madigan. Pete had completely forgotten that he had put the phone on silent at school. The real problem, however, was not the missed calls, but the battery indicator. It was already in the red zone. Hopefully it would be enough for a call to his friend.

There was a ringing tone. Pete waited impatiently, but the leader of The Three Investigators did not answer the call. He should be sitting in the passenger seat of Bob's Beetle right now, tracking Pete's position on his phone. Why on earth wouldn't he answer? Pete fervently hoped that nothing went wrong with his friends.

The voicemail jumped on. The Second Investigator counted the seconds until the beep finally sounded, then he started: "Hi, it's me. Miss Blunt is storming a house right now in full operational mode with her gun raised. Hurry up!"

Pete thought feverishly about what else he really needed to tell Jupiter. If his battery gave up, the phone could not be located. "The house is at a new development site. First big intersection... turn left at the supermarket and then straight ahead. Roof and exterior walls

finished, but no windows and doors yet. A red excavator is in front—on the left. Oh, wait!” Pete almost dropped the phone.

Miss Blunt appeared in the twilight between two houses. Now Pete could clearly see that she was holding a gun and rudely pushing a defiant man in front of her. What was happening here? Was Miss Blunt working for the police? Was she perhaps a secret agent?

Pete’s thoughts were racing. The teacher jabbed something into the man’s side, and he cried out. This was not an arrest. It was without a doubt an abduction!

“Miss Blunt is abducting a man! Right in front of me!” Pete stammered into his phone. Stunned, he watched as the man tried to break away, but the teacher reacted frighteningly quickly. Her reflexes were excellent.

Before the fugitive knew it, he was lying on the ground in front of Miss Blunt’s small car. Miss Blunt pinned him down with one knee and yanked his arms back. The man cried out again.

“Shut up!” Miss Blunt ordered him.

Pete’s heart was pounding. That was the moment when his alarm clock was supposed to ring—the moment when everything turned out to be a bizarre dream. However, Pete was not in his bed. The scene before him was real. His maths teacher had taken down a full-grown man.

The Second Investigator was torn between flight reflex, the urge to attack and shock. With trembling fingers, he ended the call. He wanted to collect himself first, but his body had already decided.

Attack! Exploit the moment of surprise! Disarm!

Without further hesitation, Pete stormed across the sandy square.

Surprised, Miss Blunt looked up. “Pete?”

The Second Investigator started to jump. The next moment, he had grabbed the teacher and was pulling her along with him to the ground. Then his head hit hard on a loose brick. Dust swirled up. Immediately, he felt a throbbing pain on his head. A dark veil descended before his eyes.

“That was Pete for sure!” Bob cried reproachfully. The First Investigator’s phone had been ringing for a long time. However, it lay unreachable on the back seat of the Partymobile and Jupiter had not found a parking space yet.

Bob closed his eyes. This pursuit was a failure all along the line. The Partymobile made a frighteningly diverse range of noises—from a low creak to a rumbling thump to an unpleasant squeak. Bob felt as if he were sitting in the belly of a living dragon. Now there was a crackling somewhere behind him. The windscreen wipers came on for no reason, wiped across the dirty windscreen and went off again. Despite the half-opened windows, the strange smell of scented candles had still not gone away.

Bob was grateful when Jupiter finally stopped at a car park. The Pacific Ocean almost reached the road at this point. There was no beach, just a few rocks. Bob took a deep breath. The wind carried fine water droplets over to him. The smell of salt water and seaweed was a real relief.

While the First Investigator fetched his backpack, Bob stretched his legs. The sun had already set, but the sky was not yet completely dark.

“Pete called and left a voicemail message.” Jupiter appeared next to Bob. He looked worried. “Apparently there’s been an abduction!”

“We have to call the police!” Bob said.

“We don’t even know what it’s about,” Jupiter interjected.

“Didn’t you say it was an abduction? Pete has got himself into something that’s clearly a bit too big for him!”

Jupiter shook his head. “If the police send a patrol car there, Miss Blunt could become all the more dangerous. We can’t risk her taking Pete hostage... and we don’t have enough information. We’d better stick to our plan.”

“Thank you very much, boy!”

Pete blinked and looked up. The words were coming from the abducted man. The man had picked himself up, sprinted to Miss Blunt’s car and yanked open the driver’s door.

“Stop!” the teacher commanded. She tried to free herself from Pete, who was lying half on top of her but she didn’t make it in time. The grape jumped and bumped towards the road.

“Where is your car?” asked Miss Blunt sharply.

“You wanted to abduct that man!” retorted Pete instead of an answer. He let himself fall back onto the sandy ground with a groan.

Miss Blunt dashed towards the road without giving Pete another look.

“I was almost knocked out by this brick,” Pete mumbled as he rubbed his head. Luckily, there was no bleeding. Slowly, he got to his feet and on wobbly legs, he followed his teacher. “Hey, what’s all this about?”

There was no reply. Pete quickened his steps. The knock on his head was still having an effect. However, he could see clearly again. Emblazoned on his teacher’s back were white capital letters: ‘BAIL ENFORCEMENT’.

“Bail enforcement?” exclaimed Pete. “You work for a bail enforcement agency?”

The ash-blond woman stopped. “So you can read. How nice. Where is your car?”

“Behind that container there... you... you... chase criminals who are on the run!”

Miss Blunt did not answer, but headed unerringly for the MG. She was already yanking on the handle of the driver’s door. Pete had not locked his car. However, he had left the key in the ignition.

“An old-fashioned manual transmission!” Miss Blunt stated, aghast. “I can’t drive this! You drive!”

“Huh?” That was all Pete could say. Completely taken off guard, he followed his teacher’s instructions. Mechanically, he fastened his seat belt, turned the ignition key and accelerated. The tyres of the MG went berserk. Sand and gravel splashed up.

“Turn around!” ordered Miss Blunt. “He’s gone south—into the industrial area.”

Pete did what she asked—just like at school. Miss Blunt could not simply be contradicted. He tried to breathe calmly and think. Basically, this wasn’t so different from the usual chases, only this time it wasn’t Jupiter who was setting the tone.

The Second Investigator pressed down on the accelerator. His car shot off. The headlights grazed the trunks of some palm trees and dry bushes.

Pete flinched. For a brief moment, he thought he saw a strange apparition. It was an angel or a ghost—a delicate being with flowing white hair, white skin and a white robe. He blinked, but by then, the being had disappeared. His exaggerated senses had played a trick on him, and he could certainly use a guardian angel now.

The MG whirled along the straight road. It was rapidly gaining speed, but Pete had no intention of being arrested as a speeder. When he got too fast, he slowed down.

“Faster!” demanded Miss Blunt.



Reluctantly, Pete accelerated. To the left and right, sparsely lit companies and warehouses flew past them, then more and more bare land and rubble heaps, which finally turned into huge vegetable fields with irrigation systems. Apart from a few gravel roads with potholes, there were no crossroads. This made tracking easier in the dark area. If the man drove onto one of the sandy roads, he would have to turn on his lights to avoid ending up in a ditch.

“He wants to get back on the coast road,” shouted Miss Blunt, who had pulled up a road map on her mobile phone. “You have to go much faster!”

“Much faster?” Pete could only hope that there were no police patrols on the road.

“Your MG is a sports car after all!”

“An old sports car,” Pete admitted.

“It’s still faster than my red shopping trolley!” Miss Blunt retorted. “We can catch up!”

Pete stepped on the accelerator all the way. The paved road ended in a turnaround. However the wine-red small car just kept going straight ahead—onto a narrow dirt road. At first it drove through the darkness, but then the lights came on. A huge cloud of dust became visible, illuminated red by the grape’s tail lights.

Pete fervently hoped that his car would survive the journey. The MG was in good condition, but the dirt road was an imposition. A Jeep would clearly be a better choice here.

Pete skilfully dodged the biggest holes and stones. His car rattled and groaned. Everything seemed to be vibrating. Then the next real road came into view. A street lamp illuminated the entrance to a ranch. In the distance were lights from moving cars.

The small car turned left just before the street lamp, its tyres screeching. It skidded across the paved road and narrowly missed the lane. Sand and gravel splashed up, then the small grape slid into the ditch with its right front tyre.

Pete slowed down and came to a stop at the side of the road. The small car in front of them was stuck. Already the door was being torn open. One person struggled into the open.

Miss Blunt reached to her belt and drew out a black and yellow coloured fancy looking gun. Then she jumped out of the MG. “Hands up!” she yelled, pointing the weapon at the man.

“If it pleases you...” The man slowly stretched both arms in the air.

The light from the street lamp shone on a tall, slim man with brown hair. Pete estimated that he was in his mid-forties. Although his situation was all but hopeless, the man grinned. “If that’s not a surprise—although my enthusiasm is limited.”

Miss Blunt raised her weapon. “You’re coming with us.”

“Three of us in that car?” The man raised an eyebrow sceptically. “I may be limber, but I’m not easily foldable.”

“If you can fit in my car, you can fit in there,” Miss Blunt commanded. “The back seat is big enough for you alone.”

“What happens now?” asked Pete as Miss Blunt handcuffed the man.

The man nodded in agreement. “That’s a very good question.”

“First you go to my car boot and open the larger bag,” Miss Blunt told Pete. “I need the restraint belt.”

Pete did not object this time. Resigned to fate, he opened the grape’s boot and found the teacher’s two black bags. He opened the larger of the two. Inside were more handcuffs, a metal chain, gloves, duct tape, a black restraint belt with a metal ring, and many other things underneath. Pete took the belt out and handed it to Miss Blunt.

For a moment, the Second Investigator wondered what she was up to. Then he saw that she was putting the restraint belt around the man’s hips. The handcuffs were fixed to the ring

in front of his body. This way the prisoner did not have to sit with his hands behind his back during the car ride.

“So what’s the plan?” Pete asked. “—Or do I have to raise my hand before I ask a question?”

“We’re not in school.” Miss Blunt snorted. “We’re going to Sacramento.” She pushed the man into the back seat of the MG.

Pete felt caught off guard. “Sacramento is not exactly in this neighbourhood.”

Miss Blunt sighed. “Listen, Pete, I’m in a big hurry. Your intervention has taken far too much time. My car is stuck in a ditch and I don’t see a rental car company around here. Besides, it’s easier if I don’t have to drive and guard a prisoner at the same time.”

“You could call the police,” Pete suggested.

“I have procedures to follow,” Miss Blunt said. “I have to hand this man over to my colleague at the bail enforcement agency. He will then turn him over to the authorities—and that is in Sacramento.”

“Two drops of truth, a bitter drop of lies and possibly a pinch of ignorance,” the man said to Pete. “This woman is leading us straight to disaster. Don’t trust her!”

“You don’t interfere!” the teacher snapped.

“Excuse me. I just wanted to warn the poor boy. It sounds worse out loud than in thought though. Maybe now is the right time for a little panic attack.”

Pete looked worriedly from Miss Blunt to the man and back again. “Sacramento is more than six hours away from here and I don’t know if I want to be part of this.”

“You are a clever boy,” the man said. “This lady here is evil personified.”

Pete’s recollection of his maths lessons with Miss Blunt certainly substantiated the man’s claim. The Second Investigator hesitated. What could he do? He couldn’t just hand in his MG and leave his car to its fate. What about the man? If he was telling the truth, Pete could not abandon him. Similarly, if Miss Blunt was telling the truth, he would be morally obligated to help her. However, if they were both lying... then what?

In any case, Pete knew he was now in a big mess—probably even a bigger mess than his school grades. What then was in it for him? How would his school grades be affected in such a situation? In the first place, would his actions here even count towards his grades? Perhaps not.

“Well, I think that I—” Pete began.

“She doesn’t have manners either,” the man continued. “Electrocutes harmless people, hijacks a sports car from a poor child, and disregards the basic rules of cultivated communication. She didn’t even introduce us. By the way, my name is Scott Lawrence Quinn. I am an American citizen, California resident, freelance mathematician and physicist—specializing in chaos theory.”

“You are a wanted fraudster and professional liar!” Miss Blunt snapped.

“Not at all,” Quinn objected with dignity. “When I say something, it’s the truth. The rest is sideline silence.”

Miss Blunt snorted and turned to Pete. “I’ll take responsibility for the mission. Of course I’ll pay for the petrol and the food. Now be good enough to help me load the stuff from my car into yours.”

“You could give me credit for the trip in lieu of extra maths assignments,” Pete suggested as he carried the bags to his car.

“The kid has potential,” Quinn shouted with undisguised glee from the MG.

Miss Blunt’s lips narrowed, and a steep crease formed between her eyebrows. Then she told Pete: “I didn’t hear that. If you make such a suggestion again, I will consider it

blackmail.”

## 4. The Trail of a Crime

“This must be it.” Bob peered out the window. They had reached the new housing development site on the city limits. To their left stretched a sandy area that was only sparsely lit. They could just make out a few tall palm trees, construction machinery and the outlines of several houses.

“Any sign of Pete or his MG?” asked Jupiter. He stopped behind a container.

Bob shook his head as he tapped away on his mobile phone screen. “His location is no longer showing up for me.”

“The question is why,” Jupiter said. “Maybe his phone battery is flat or he’s in a dead zone... or it could also be that he has been found.”

Bob became nervous. “Then we have to do something urgently.”

“Right.” Jupiter energetically pulled on the handbrake. “We’ll get out and get an overview. With luck, we’ll find clues that will help us.”

The two boys entered the construction site. The light from the street was just enough to make out the outline of the houses.

“What we’re looking for is a newly built house with outer walls and a roof, without windows and doors,” Jupiter whispered. “There should be a red excavator in front of it.”

“There!” Bob pointed to a house that matched the description.

First, they circled the house and peered behind some tarpaulins. The inside was dark and silent. It looked like no one was there.

Finally, Jupiter and Bob took heart and climbed onto the verandah. The wood creaked treacherously. Bob winced.

Cautiously, the two investigators went through the opening for the front door and landed directly in a spacious room. It smelled mainly of fresh wood. In addition, however, there was also the whiff of expensive aftershave in the air. There were plastic sheets in front of some of the windows, rustling eerily in the evening breeze and drowning out the bright chirping of crickets.

They heard a car drive slowly by. The light slid over the bare walls, then it went dark again. Bob’s eyes were slow to adjust to the twilight. He quietly approached a staircase leading to the upper floor and listened intently. There was no sound up there.

Bob tiptoed up the stairs. As there were nothing in the rooms here, he went back downstairs.

In the meantime, Jupiter had switched on his flashlight and had found what he was looking for. From used dishes to a sleeping bag, there were several clues on the ground floor that someone lived here—or had lived here. He also found a toolbox, a battery-powered lamp and a box of food.

“This could indicate moonlighting,” the First Investigator speculated when he presented the find to Bob. “If you want to save money, you don’t hire a company to do the interior work, but unregistered migrant workers. They camp in the house, finish everything and get a few dollars in their hands tax-free at the end.”

The plastic sheets in front of the large living room window rustled softly again. A cool breeze brushed their faces.

“We have to call Inspector Cotta,” Bob said. He no longer bothered to speak quietly. There was obviously no one in this house. “Miss Blunt abducted a man here a short while ago and now we don’t know where Pete is. Everyone back home in Rocky Beach is guaranteed to be worried because we didn’t show up for dinner.”

“I’ll call Aunt Mathilda and ask her to let your parents know. It’s enough for now if everyone thinks we’re going on an outing.”

“And what about Cotta?”

“What do you want Inspector Cotta to do? Search all over California for Pete’s car?”

“Yes,” Bob replied. “That would be a start!”

An eerie crackling sounded. Immediately, both of them turned around.

“Just a heavier gust of wind,” Jupiter said calmly, glancing at a tarpaulin that was still moving slightly. “We are very close to the coast after all.”

Bob listened. The crickets had interrupted their concert briefly. Now they have started again. The chirping was strangely comforting so Bob relaxed a little. “Anyway, the inspector could find out if Miss Blunt has a criminal past.”

“With a known criminal record, she wouldn’t be teaching at high school,” Jupiter said as he opened the sleeping bag. A bag made of truck tarpaulin was found.

“Here we have something useful.” The First Investigator reached for his backpack which always contained basic investigation equipment. This included rubber gloves for forensics. Jupiter put them on and then opened the bag. Bob was with him in a few steps and watched as his friend took out and placed several items on the bare wooden floorboards—a lighter, a pen, an envelope, a mobile phone, and a charger.

“Unfortunately, no wallet with a driver’s licence,” said the First Investigator. He took the mobile phone and switched it on. “Excellent! It’s not password protected.”

“Whose is it?”

Jupiter examined the device. “Normally, a mobile phone provides deep insights into the user’s life. There are people whose everyday life can be completely reconstructed by analyzing the data—from the shopping list and appointments to conversations with friends, colleagues and relatives.”

“So what can you deduce from this phone?” Bob asked.

“Nothing yet,” Jupiter looked up regretfully. “This phone has hardly been used. Either it’s new or the owner regularly deleted everything. There are only numbers in the address book, no names... and there are only three messages.” He looked at them:

SMS received—Wednesday, 6:56 pm

*Sorry, I have problems with the stallion again. Meanwhile Leroy is pressurizing me. He asks if the built-in cupboard is ready.*

SMS sent—Wednesday, 7:20 pm

*I’ve got the materials, but constructing it takes time. I am a thinker, not a tradesman.*

SMS received—Wednesday, 7:31 pm

*I recommended you as a handyman. If Leroy doesn’t see progress, he’ll blame me. He’s been doing that since he was a kid.*

“As far as I can tell, it’s only about the work in this house,” Jupiter said.

“So the abducted man worked here for the owner of the house,” Bob surmised.

“I’m afraid it’s not very informative.” Juve continued to check the phone. “Only the voicemail remains. The last message is only twenty minutes old, so the man probably haven’t

even listened to it.”

Jupe dialled the voicemail and turned on the loudspeaker so Bob could listen in. A man’s voice came out—soft, pressed and with barely suppressed panic:

*“Possum here. Where are you? I’ve been calling you for hours. Anyway, we’re done! They’ve tracked me down! Snake is definitely on the way to get you. There’s another problem, it’s—”* There was a crash in the background. *“Hey!”* the man’s voice cried desperately. *“Why are you back here? ... Stop! I... No!”* There was a rumble, then the message ended.

“That was a warning,” Jupiter said, concerned, “and the caller was obviously caught.”

“Just like the owner of this mobile phone,” said Bob. “So this Snake was here... and we even know her name—Miss Blunt.”

“Wait a minute.” Jupiter had just pressed a button.

*“You have an old voicemail. Friday, 9:30 am.”*

They heard the same man’s voice: *“It’s me, Possum. I really need to talk to you! Bison just showed up here at the rodeo. That can’t be a coincidence! Also, a couple of my buddies told me that someone else was asking about me. Something is very wrong! Can’t you tell me your great plan now? I’m sweating! So get in touch! Oh yes, my brother just called and announced that he’s going to Port Hueneme tomorrow to check on the progress of the house... so you better do something otherwise you’ll have to find a new place to stay!”*

Jupiter looked up from the device. “We can assume that this case is not a harmless misunderstanding. The two voice messages suggest that there is a real threat. So Pete is indeed on the trail of a crime.”

“We’ll inform Cotta!” urged Bob.

“I guess we have to...” The First Investigator twisted the corners of his mouth. It was clear that he would have liked to solve the case without the help of the police. “It makes more sense. We mustn’t put people’s lives in danger under any circumstances.” Reluctantly, he used his own mobile phone to call the Rocky Beach Police Department.

While Jupiter was on the phone, Bob packed the finds back into the tarpaulin bag. Again and again, he looked up nervously at his friend.

“Not there?” Jupe finally said. “Who is standing in for him?”

That did not sound good. The Three Investigators were treated kindly by most people at the Rocky Beach Police Department, but sometimes they were also being ridiculed. In case of emergency, it was necessary to speak directly to Inspector Cotta.

“Yes, thank you.” Jupiter hung up and then turned to Bob. “The matter has been settled. Inspector Kershaw is covering Cotta’s duty today.”

“Bad luck all the way.” Bob reluctantly recalled their previous encounters with Kershaw. He didn’t like The Three Investigators. “I’m afraid we’ll still have to bite the bullet and talk to him.”

The First Investigator wanted to say something back, but then he stopped and listened. The hum of an engine grew louder. A vehicle’s headlights flooded the room.

“Someone’s here!” Jupe whispered.

The sound of the engine died away. Then, car doors were opened and closed.

Jupiter and Bob exchanged a horrified look. There weren’t exactly many places to hide in the shell of the house. Only at the last moment did they squeeze into the half-finished built-in

cupboard under the stairs. Jupiter had taken the tarpaulin bag with him.

“Here?” asked a very deep male voice.

“I think so,” a woman replied.

Footsteps sounded on the verandah. “We have to hurry,” the woman said. “Snake is supposed to show up here, and that can be very uncomfortable, not to mention dangerous.”

Through the gap in the cupboard door, Jupiter and Bob could make out two figures entering the house. It was a very tall man and a medium-sized woman. Both switched on flashlights. The cones of light glided searchingly through the room.

Footsteps slowly approached. The tarpaulin rustled. Bob held his breath. He felt Jupiter duck down beside him.

“Well, what have we here?”

## 5. A Long Journey Ahead

Pete Crenshaw was struggling with his fate. He was supposed to drive his maths teacher and a suspected criminal to Sacramento!

Miss Blunt guided the Second Investigator through unfamiliar roads that led inland to a state highway. At first they were still surrounded by lights, but on the highway, the landscape became darker and lonelier. Only now and then did they pass through illuminated towns.

“You know what?” Mr Quinn asked when they had left Santa Paula behind. “There you are in the car, starting off on a long drive and all you can think about are toilets—as if the mere fact that there’s none within reach puts pressure on your bladder.”

“I don’t have to think about toilets,” Pete’s maths teacher replied.

“What about a hot meal?”

“No.”

“I’ll summarize then,” Quinn said. “You want to keep me on this uncomfortable back seat for several hours while I have no access to food or sanitation?”

“There will be breaks,” Miss Blunt said, “but on my terms.”

“How did you end up with this uncompromising person?” the man directed the question to Pete. “Do you trust her?”

The Second Investigator pretended that he had to concentrate on the road.

“Sheesh...” Mr Quinn hissed. “I’ll take that as a ‘no’. What would be interesting then is whether this so-called bounty hunter can in turn trust her sidekick. Does she really just want to put me in jail or does she have other plans altogether?”

“Stop unsettling the boy!” Miss Blunt ordered her prisoner.

“He’s at the wheel. That means he bears part of the responsibility. He should calmly know that this mission is dangerous. Trusting the wrong people can end badly.”

“Hopefully everything will go according to plan,” Pete said as Miss Blunt remained silent.

“I hope so too. However, I am exploring the borderline between predictability and chaos,” Quinn explained. “The outcome of our journey depends on many factors. You are one of them... so is our hard-hearted tour guide. In addition to influences such as weather and traffic, there are unfortunately also a few individuals who are not present and who can influence what is happening. They could be armed and will not be happy if their plans are being thwarted.”

“I see...” Pete was confused. Mr Quinn expressed himself even more awkwardly than Jupiter. It was hard to follow what the man was saying and keep his eyes on the road at the same time. Quinn seemed anything but confidence-inspiring.

Pete, however, could not assess Miss Blunt’s role as well. Bounty hunters pursued defendants who failed to show up for court hearings. As far as he knew, they did not wear uniforms. It was quite possible that the vest Miss Blunt was wearing was just a disguise. So far, his teacher had neither shown him an ID nor presented an order—or did she even need one? Besides, there was something else that was bothering Pete. Feverishly, he thought about how to send a message to his friends. He had to tell Jupiter and Bob where he was going—without arousing suspicion.



“Miss Blunt?”

“What is it?”

“I need to call my parents.”

“Not now.”

“When then? When my mother calls the police to report me missing?”

This argument seemed to work. “Whatever. Pull over there on the hard shoulder.”

“Can I borrow your phone? My battery is flat and I don’t have a car phone charger.”

Miss Blunt grimaced. Without taking her eyes off the prisoner, she reached into a pocket of her vest. “No details about this mission!”

“As far as my parents know, I am with friends,” said Pete. “If I tell them where I am now, they would go nuts.”

When Pete held the switched-on device in his hands, he realized that he did not know Jupiter’s or Bob’s mobile phone numbers by heart. Normally, he simply clicked on the corresponding names in the address book of his phone. How was he supposed to call his friends now? All that was left was the landline at Headquarters—one of the few numbers Pete could recite in his sleep. The crucial question was whether Jupiter or Bob would remotely retrieve the message on the answering machine.

“What are you waiting for?” urged Miss Blunt.

“For an inspiration,” came from the back seat. “Lying to parents is a challenging task.”

“Oh yes,” Pete murmured. Then he quickly keyed in the number of Headquarters and pressed the mobile phone to his ear.

When the answering machine beeped, Pete spoke in a brittle voice: “Er... hello, Mum. I see that you’re not a home now. Anyway, I... I’m still at the salvage yard and can’t come home for dinner. The boys and I just hit a super hard level on *Western Revenge—River Saga*. If it gets late, we’ll sleep over at Jupe’s place. His aunt agrees. Oh yes, my mobile phone battery is flat. Also, if Mr Knivel calls, you can tell him I’ll go to his place tomorrow to mow his lawn. See you then!” Pete hung up.

“*Western Revenge*?” Mr Quinn said with amusement.

“That is the new video game from Doe Dungeon.” Pete handed the mobile phone back to his teacher.

“You should have said you’re immersed in school work instead. That goes down better with mothers.”

“—But she wouldn’t have believed me,” Pete said.

“I’m afraid so,” Miss Blunt said.

Pete remained silent. The name of the computer game had been a clue, just like the name ‘Knivel’. He hoped that Jupe or Bob would be alert enough to deduce the situation and proceed from there—if they listened to the message at all.

“A sleeping bag?” the man grumbled.

The cones of light continued to move through the room.

“I’m afraid we’re too late,” the woman said anxiously.

“Hmm...” the man murmured.

“She’s taken him! Odo, we have to call the police.”

“Hmm...” the man murmured again. He continued to look around and came a little closer to the cupboard.

“That means we’ll lose the fee.”

“Hmm...”

“We might as well close our PI agency.”

“Hmm...”

“Don’t act like this is not a big deal,” the woman said irritably. Now she too walked around the room. She shone her light on the sleeping bag again. “We promised his mother we’d find him. The old woman will have a heart attack if we confess to her that we couldn’t intervene in time.”

“Hmm...”

“—Or maybe he’s hiding. He’s probably scared.”

“Hmm...” The man called Odo was at the built-in cupboard and shone the light into it. Bob was blinded by the flashlight and raised his hands in front of his eyes.

“Good evening,” Jupiter said as calmly as he could when the light was shone at him.

“That’s not him. They’re teenagers,” Bob heard the woman say.

The light became less intense and he slowly opened his eyes. The woman had also approached and looked at them in wonder. “What are you doing here?”

“We are looking for someone,” Jupiter said truthfully.

“Well, we are too,” said the woman. “Come out. Then we’ll talk.”

Slowly, Jupiter and Bob climbed out of the cupboard. They couldn’t see much of the two people.

“Who are you looking for exactly?” the woman asked.

“Our friend,” Jupiter explained.

“The man who camped here is too old to be your friend,” the woman replied. “He’s over forty.”

“So we are looking for someone else who is supposed to be here,” Jupiter added after he had decided not to reveal to the newcomers that they were not just looking for Pete. “That means our goals overlap. Am I right in assuming that you are here as private investigators?”

“You bet,” the woman replied, dumbfounded, but then she came to her senses. “You overheard us?”

“It was inevitable.”

“That’s true,” said the woman, now a touch more friendly. “Odo and I actually run a small private investigation agency. Right now we’re looking for a missing man on behalf of an old lady. He’s her son.”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured.

“Our client suspects that he got into the wrong circles and had to flee. He may have witnessed a crime. Allegedly, a woman was set on him. We don’t know much about her, only that she operates under the alias ‘Snake’ and is very dangerous.”

“Then we have to work together,” the First Investigator said. “Right now, our friend could well be with your client’s son.”

The woman hesitated. “You are too young for such a dangerous thing. Better leave the search to us.”

“So you can get the fee?” asked Bob.

The woman cleared her throat. “Well... yes, that too.”

“We leave the fee to you,” Jupiter explained, “so money-wise we won’t get in your way, but it would be entirely in your interest to share the results of your investigation with us. Our friend will hopefully call us soon and tell us where he is. We suspect he is following the Snake in question and your client’s son.”

“This is all a bit unexpected,” the woman admitted. “Snake has beaten us to it, our target is gone and instead we find you.”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured.

“Your concerns are understandable,” Jupiter continued calmly, “but we expect information that will help you.”

Bob hoped that Jupiter would be right. After all, it was not certain that Pete was going after Snake. It was quite possible that Snake had caught him instead and that the Second Investigator had not been able to get in touch at all. The thought was so depressing that Bob quickly dismissed it.

“In any case, we should pull together,” Jupiter said, “otherwise we’ll make the investigation unnecessarily difficult for ourselves.”

“Probably,” the woman said hesitantly and then turned to Odo. “Are we working with the boys? What do you think, Odo?”

Bob expected a ‘hmm...’, instead, the big man growled a low “good”.

“Then that’s settled.” The woman pointed the flashlight at herself for a moment. “I’m Nancy, and this...” she waved the cone of light at the man, “is my business partner Odo.”

“Jupiter and Bob,” said the First Investigator.

Bob was waiting for Jupiter to show the investigators what he had found in the bag, but his friend obviously had other plans. “As long as we are waiting for news, we should exchange information.”

Odo nodded. “Yes, but not here. I’m hungry.”

It was an unusual number of words for the silent man and they fell on open ears. As it turned out, they could all get something to eat.

“It’s hard to think on an empty stomach,” Nancy said. “I saw a fast food restaurant on the way here. Shall we go there together?”

“Are you allowed to arrest people just like that?” asked Pete into the silence. By now they had left the town of Fillmore behind them. The green signs above the highway announced that they were approaching the intersection where State Route 126 met Interstate 5. “You’re a bounty hunter, aren’t you?”

“My main occupation is a school teacher,” Miss Blunt corrected him.

Had Miss Blunt just admitted that she was not a bounty hunter—and therefore an abductor? Why wouldn’t she answer him honestly? “But what about that vest you are wearing?” Pete asked.

“You own T-shirts with superheroes printed on them,” Miss Blunt said. “That doesn’t mean you are one.”

“You can’t know that,” said Mr Quinn. “Maybe our Peter Parker was bitten by a genetically modified super spider and can do amazing things. If so, we’re our way through the country together with the legendary Spider-Man.”

“My name is not Parker, and everyone calls me ‘Pete’,” said the Second Investigator half in thought.

“So Pete or shall I call you Spider-Boy,” Mr Quinn continued curiously, “how well do you know this lady who is bossing you around?”

“None of your business!” This time Miss Blunt did not sound cool, but rather concerned as if it was a problem that the man continued to strike a conversation with Pete.

Mr Quinn laughed. “Pete-not-Parker wants to know more. It’s the nature of young people. I’m no expert, but I think my general knowledge is sufficient.”

“You could just keep quiet for a change.”

“Bounty hunters are relics of the Wild West,” Mr Quinn continued unperturbed. “Back then, they rode from place to place with their saddlebags full of posters of wanted people.

Criminals had to be turned in dead or alive. You can imagine that this often led to shoot-outs with bloodshed. Even today, bounty hunters are still allowed to carry weapons. However, wanted persons are supposed to be handed in alive to the authorities. That is why stun guns are now used instead of firearms. Understandable so far?"

Pete nodded.

"I'm glad to hear that. I could really be a good teacher," Mr Quinn said with satisfaction.

"If you must know, stun guns deliver an electric shock by direct contact," Miss Blunt said coolly. "What I also have, Mr Quinn, is a Taser which is a long range electroshock weapon. It shoots out projectiles that cling to your body with little barbs. The effect is very, very unpleasant."

"Tsk, tsk!" Mr Quinn muttered. "How appropriate... when you have the charm of an electric bull fence. What do you teach at school? Weaponry and warfare?"

"Anyway, before I was so rudely interrupted, I wanted to say that while some states here in America now ban bounty hunting, it is allowed in California. Just about any Californian of legal age can earn money from it. At the end of the day, all these bounty hunters have to do is to pass a mundane course."

"Two courses," Miss Blunt corrected curtly, "and they are definitely not mundane."

"Fine. Two almost mundane courses then. In any case, it is essential to notify the police before making an arrest."

"Of course," Miss Blunt confirmed.

"Did you do that?" asked Pete.

"The call has been made to the authorities."

"Oh?" Mr Quinn wondered. "By whom?"

"It doesn't matter." Miss Blunt had apparently decided to end the discussion.

But Mr Quinn did not let up. "Theoretically speaking, this is a legally tolerated abduction."

"Really?" Pete asked, but got no answer from Miss Blunt.

"So I was abducted by you and this lady," Mr Quinn continued. "Say... nowadays, you don't hear the phrase 'dead or alive' in use anymore... or could I be wrong?"

## 6. Unravelling Clues From Pete

Jupiter was really hungry. The prospect of a chicken meal and a big milkshake was wonderful. Unfortunately, the pink Partymobile seemed to have other plans. Just before the driveway of the fast food restaurant, it made an unpleasant noise. Jupiter carefully stepped on the accelerator. The black pick-up truck of the other investigators had already turned off and was heading for the drive-through.

“Come on!” Jupiter cheered on his new car. However, it stuttered and then stopped with a loud ‘Poof!’.

“What is it now?” asked Bob, emphatically unconcerned.

It was one of those rare moments when Jupiter didn’t have a suitable answer. This car was a mystery in itself. Bob had been right, of course. It had been a bad buy, but the First Investigator would not admit that. He was used to always being in the know. Normally he was a nose ahead of his friends—at least when intelligence and knowledge were required. Superfluous challenges such as long-distance runs, small children, big dogs, giggling groups of girls and banged-up cars, however, left Jupiter perplexed.

“Maybe this car was once used as a drinks truck selling lemonade,” Bob said. “With so many lemons on board, it eventually turned into one.”

“Ha, ha,” Jupiter growled sarcastically. “I’m sorry this car isn’t perfect.” He started the engine again. It roared to life, stuttered a few times before moving. “Next time we’ll take your infallible Beetle.”

Bob gave him a sideways glance but said nothing. Both boys were silent until they reached the intercom next to the restaurant. It was a man-sized device in the shape of a chicken. They placed their order and then drove up to the window where they could pay.

“Pete hasn’t got back to us yet,” Bob said.

“He probably just forgot to charge his mobile phone yet again.” Jupiter pulled out his wallet. “The question is whether he can get access to a public phone on the way.”

—And,” Bob added, “if he knows our phone numbers by heart.”

Jupiter stumbled. Pete was not exactly an ace when it came to remembering things. That was especially true for numbers. “That’s right. If not, he’ll have to fall back on the few numbers he has at his disposal.”

Bob understood. “All right. I’ll check the answering machine at Headquarters in a minute.”

A young woman appeared in the window. She was wearing a headset and a cap with a laughing chicken.

“Cool car!”

“Yes,” Jupiter said curtly.

“Which one of you is Pizzy?”

“Huh? ... Oh, neither. That’s our boss.”

“Is it possible to book a party with you?”

“No.” Jupiter sighed abysmally.

“Too bad.”

While Jupiter was waiting for his change, Bob keyed something into his mobile phone, raised it to his ear and listened.

Jupiter drove on to the next window. By now, Nancy and Odo in the pick-up had received their order and were pulling into a lighted car park behind the restaurant.

Jupiter was convinced that it made sense to work with Odo and Nancy. They clearly knew more about the case than The Three Investigators. Still, the First Investigator disliked trusting the two of them unreservedly. They didn't strike him as hardened professional sleuths, but they were investigating for money, not for law and order. What's more, they were short of cash. If they had the necessary information, they would definitely try to get rid of him and Bob—and that might put Pete in danger. It was better not to tell them for the time being that the three of them were also investigators—successful ones at that.

*“Bon appétit!”*

Jupiter wheeled around. The warm smell of crispy fried chicken wafted around his nose.

“One deluxe meal with extra fries, one deluxe vegetarian, one milkshake, and one large Coke.”

“Perfect!” Gratefully, Jupiter accepted the large paper bag and handed it to Bob who was still listening to his phone.

Jupe pulled into the car park. Then he grabbed the bag back from Bob, took out his milkshake and placed it into a cup holder that was glued beside the driver's seat.

“Did Pete leave a message at Headquarters?” he asked as soon as Bob ended the call.

“Yes.”

“Well?” asked Jupiter impatiently.

“Seems like he couldn't talk freely.”

“You mean he was forced to make the call?”

“Maybe,” Bob said. “I guess you should listen to it for yourself. Hidden messages are your speciality.”

Jupiter looked over at the other investigators' pick-up truck. Nancy had got out. She was holding a cup and sipping from a straw. Her partner was just joining her.

“Our new companions are waiting. You can go out and talk to them,” Jupiter suggested, “but don't say anything about Pete's call and don't tell them about our investigation agency. I need to get a better picture of the two of them first.”

“You got it.” Bob fished the veggie meal and Coke out of the bag. “See you in a minute.”

“Yeah...” Jupiter quickly helped himself to some fries, then remotely accessed the answering machine.

In the meantime, a new message had arrived. It came from Pete's girlfriend Kelly:

*“Pete, I've been trying to reach you for half an eternity! We had a date on the beach, remember? Jupe and Bob, if you're listening to this, tell Pete that I'm going to Jean-Pierre's party alone now. Have a nice evening!”*

Jupiter had no idea who Jean-Pierre was. Nevertheless, the next message was from Pete:

*“Er... hello, Mum. I see that you're not at home now...”*

It was clear—someone was listening and Pete claimed to be calling his mother as a cover. It was quite possible that the Second Investigator had been instructed to allay his parents' concerns, but he had a plan. That became clearer to Jupiter with every sentence he heard. He was relieved that his friend kept a cool head. The message, however, was not immediately apparent to the First Investigator. What was Pete getting at?

Jupiter thought hard. He knew about computer games, but he had not yet played *Western Revenge*.

‘... If Mr Knivel calls, you can tell him I’ll go to his place tomorrow to mow his lawn...’ Now, that was a tangible clue! A normally gifted person might have had to think longer, but Jupiter’s computer brain immediately found the connection. Jacky Knivel had been a famous clown during his lifetime. The Three Investigators had solved a case some time ago involving an inheritance dispute after his death.

The First Investigator compiled a list of keywords in his head—‘western’, ‘revenge’, ‘river’, ‘circus’ and ‘inheritance’. Could a destination perhaps be derived from this? There was only one major river near Port Hueneme and that was the Santa Clara River.

Jupiter quickly glanced at the map. The river meandered along the city of Oxnard to the sea. Very close to the river was a neighbourhood called El Rio West. The Spanish word ‘*rio*’ meant ‘river’ and ‘West’ matched ‘Western Revenge’. The place was also only a short drive from Port Hueneme. Pete’s knowledge of Spanish was poor, but Jupiter trusted that he knew the word ‘*rio*’.

The trail led with a high probability to El Rio West in Oxnard, but how was the rest to be interpreted? Was there a circus tent? Was Miss Blunt seeking revenge or was there an inheritance at stake?

Jupiter grabbed his food and milkshake and got out of the car.

Nancy and Odo were fortunately standing in the light of a street lamp. Jupiter hoped to unobtrusively learn more about the two of them. He had often deduced things through close observation and that helped him assess a person. They were details that many people did not notice, for example, an animal hair on the jacket, dirt under the fingernails or small ink stains.

“Here I am,” said the First Investigator, looking at the others as casually as possible.

The hunky Odo held a paper cup in his hand and sipped thoughtfully from a colourful straw. Although he had certainly long since passed forty, his face was still boyish. His shoulder-length hair was dyed mahogany-brown and fell in slight waves on an old-fashioned suit of nut-brown corduroy. Without question, he was not only very taciturn, but also a man with unusual tastes.

Meanwhile, his partner stood leaning casually against the lamp post. Jupiter estimated her to be in her late twenties. She had the build of a competitive swimmer, wore scuffed jeans and cowboy boots and had her black hair tied back in a braid. Although she was by far the younger of the two, she set the tone in the team.

“Well, were you able to reach your friend?”

“No,” Jupiter replied truthfully, “but I have received a hint. Could it be that our destination is very close?”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured.

“Where exactly?” came the counter-question from Nancy.

“In El Rio West, a neighbourhood of Oxnard.”

“Really?” asked Nancy doubtfully. “Oxnard hasn’t played a role in our case so far.”

“Hmm...” Odo affirmed.

“Could it be a stopover?” pondered Bob.

Again came a “hmm...” from Odo.

“That would be one explanation,” Nancy said.

“What information do you have about the case so far?” Jupiter asked.

“We are looking for a man,” Nancy explained. “He’s 45 years old, about 1.8 metres tall, slim and highly educated. Until recently, he lived in Northern California. We suspect he hasn’t been hiding in Port Hueneme for long.”

“From whom?”

“We don’t know the exact background,” Nancy confessed.

Jupiter put a finger to his lower lip. “Then how did you know about Snake?”

“His mother must have overheard a phone call and picked up that he was being followed.”

“That’s right,” Odo said.

“And how did you come up with the hiding place in Port Hueneme?” Jupiter wanted to know.

“The usual research,” Nancy explained. “Our client had an old address book of her son’s and we called the contacts.”

Jupiter was about to ask the next question, but Bob was starting to get nervous. “I hate to interrupt, but if we don’t act, we might be too late. Jupe, are you sure they are going to El Rio West?”

“Eighty percent.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Nancy said. “Let’s set a meeting point there and go now.”



## 7. Caught Red-Handed!

“We can’t possibly search all of El Rio West for Pete’s MG,” Bob said as they sat back in the Partymobile. “There has to be a more concrete clue.”

“Not necessarily.” Jupiter started the engine. “Pete developed the message in a stressful situation. I imagine he couldn’t think of anything better in a hurry. It’s also possible that he didn’t know anymore himself.”

“*Western Revenge—River Saga*,” Bob said. “If this really is a reference to El Rio West, then Pete really had a flash of inspiration.”

“Why not?” asked Jupiter. “After all, we’ve known our Pete long enough not to class him as a simple-minded sportsman. Pete has more up his sleeve than he knows.”

“That’s right,” Bob agreed, “or we might have interpreted him wrong.”

“You mean we should think about other interpretations?”

“Yes,” said Bob. “Let’s just start with the game. Jeffrey was telling me and Pete all about *Western Revenge* the other day.”

“I wasn’t there,” Jupiter said.

“Exactly,” Bob replied. “The game is about a bounty hunter who rides with his companions to the Sacramento River at the time of the gold rush. He pretends to be looking for a convict. However, he actually wants to take revenge on a landowner. The developers have been strikingly accurate in their use of old maps and travel documentation. Jeffrey said that the game could easily replace history lessons.”

“That is indeed an important clue!” Jupiter stopped at a red light. “Pete must have hoped that you remembered the conversation. Now we have a whole new set of clues—from gold as a motive to historical sites to the Sacramento River.”

“It’s not exactly around the corner though.”

The traffic light turned green and Jupiter stepped on the accelerator. Almost at the same time, a new thought occurred to him. “Bob! I recalled something just now, but did not delve into it further. Remember our circus case involving the clown and the subsequent inheritance dispute?”

“Right! The clown was a Mr Knivel—Jacky Knivel!”

“That’s right. We also went to his house as part of the investigation.” Jupiter almost stalled the engine with excitement. “It was quite a long drive up north to—”

“—Sacramento!” Bob blurted out. “Of course! Do you think that’s where Pete is going?”

“I’m afraid so.” Jupiter nodded tensely.

“Jupe, it’s more than 600 kilometres from here to Sacramento!” Bob cried.

“That’s true,” Jupiter admitted. “The man Nancy and Odo are looking for is from Northern California. Combined with the clues from Pete’s message, Sacramento definitely makes more sense than El Rio West.”

Bob stared through the windscreen in dismay. “Then we’re heading to the wrong place.”

“Not a big problem,” Jupiter replied.

“Not a big problem?” echoed Bob.

“Yes,” Jupiter replied with confidence. “I know the area here from the many shopping trips with Uncle Titus. Just past El Rio West, we turn onto the highway towards Santa Clarita

and take Interstate 5 north from there. It might even be the fastest route given the current traffic situation.”

Bob calmed down a little. “And what do we tell Odo and Nancy?”

“We’ll tell them the new destination at the meeting point. My guess is that they won’t be too thrilled.”

Bob glanced at his watch. “Hard to believe this little test drive is turning into a real trip. I hope your car can handle it.”

Pete knew Interstate 5 from past trips. The freeway led through a barren area with brown hills, rugged mountain ranges and isolated lakes. However, he couldn’t see much of nature at this time of the day.

The headlights of the MG illuminated the lane markings on the grey road surface. It was a monotonous picture that made Pete feel sleepy, yet he could not afford to be tired. In his head, the scenes of the last few hours replayed like a movie.

Just then he thought of high school, where it all started earlier in the day. When he had overheard his teacher in the classroom, there had been talk of information that Miss Blunt wanted to print out. Maybe it was about an address or the background for the operation. Pete assumed that the documents were in one of the two bags that were in the boot. If he wanted to find out more, he definitely had to risk a look in the bags. The only question was how he was going to do it. Miss Blunt didn’t think much of breaks. Maybe he would have to drive without stopping all the way to Sacramento.

At least this concern soon proved unfounded. Mr Quinn adamantly urged a stop. “I am aware that you are in a hurry... but I don’t want to leave a wet spot on this seat.”

“I hope so!” said Pete. “Please, Miss Blunt. Let him out for a moment.”

“I won’t run away,” Mr Quinn promised. However, he sounded as if he meant exactly the opposite.

When they finally found a stopping place, Pete was disappointed. Miss Blunt proceeded so energetically that there was hardly time to open the boot unnoticed. She put a thin metal chain on the prisoner and led him to a bush.

“Like a dachshund,” commented Mr Quinn, “but I shouldn’t complain.”

In the meantime, Pete had decided to try something but had only just got to at the rear of his MG when Miss Blunt returned with Quinn.

“What are you doing?” she asked suspiciously.

“I’m checking the rear lights,” Pete replied. “Sometimes they don’t work.”

“See that the car is operational,” she said curtly. Then she directed Quinn into the back seat.

“I’m hungry,” Pete complained, “and if I’m not to fall asleep at the wheel, I need a coffee.”

“Coffee is not for students,” Miss Blunt said.

“A Coke, then.”

“A small Coke.” She nodded curtly, “at the next petrol station.”

Just before Lebec, a sign on the side of the road advertised a rest area with a petrol station, diner and motel.

“That’s where we’re going,” the teacher decided, “but only to stock up on the food we need.”

“Just as well,” said Mr Quinn. “I am in desperate need of a proper dinner. However, you would have to pay for me. When I was forcefully abducted, you acted so frantically that I couldn’t even pack. That’s not good for a long journey like this.”

“I’ll run the errands.” Miss Blunt put an additional restraint on the prisoner as a safety measure. Then she told Pete: “Open the boot. I need to get something. Meanwhile, you watch him.”

She got out and went to the boot. Pete watched her in the rearview mirror until the boot lid went up and blocked the view. Hopefully she didn’t take all the documents with her now.

A moment later, the boot lid was slammed shut. Miss Blunt held a small bag in her hands—too small for printed papers, unless she had folded the sheets several times, but that would have been out of character for Miss Blunt. At school, she always filed all sheets of paper neatly in folders.

The teacher went to the driver’s side of the car and handed Pete something that looked like a flashlight. “This is a stun gun,” she said. “I’m giving it to you in case he tries anything funny.”

“I’ll be good,” Mr Quinn said.

Miss Blunt proceeded to explain to Pete how the stun gun worked, and Mr Quinn listened intently.

As soon as Miss Blunt had finished, Mr Quinn said: “Say, Pete, if you survive this ordeal and get back to school, I’d suggest that you switch to another class. This teacher here, if you don’t do what she wants, will come around and threaten to electrocute you.”

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll electrocute you again!” Miss Blunt yelled.

“See what I mean?” Quinn said softly.

With that, Miss Blunt hastily walked off.

“You can take your time! I won’t miss you,” Mr Quinn called out to her.

Pete waited until the teacher had disappeared into the petrol station shop. Then he took a quick look at the prisoner’s shackles. With these, the man would not escape so quickly.

“Stay where you are!” he admonished nevertheless.

Pete pushed down the lock on the passenger door to make a possible escape more difficult. Then he jumped out of the car and locked the driver’s door. Miss Blunt couldn’t see him from inside the building, but he had to be quick.

He hurried to the boot, opened it and grabbed the larger bag. It was the bag he had already opened for Miss Blunt in Port Hueneme. He pushed aside the things he already saw earlier. Below them, he found a powerful flashlight, pepper spray, binoculars, two walkie-talkies, batteries, and two cloth pouches with something inside them.

Pete briefly checked that Mr Quinn was still in his seat, then he opened the smaller bag. It contained clothes including a vest similar to the one Miss Blunt was now wearing. At the bottom, he found a first aid kit, a few maps of different areas in California, and finally, what he had been looking for—a folder with several sheets of paper.

Pete checked again. Mr Quinn was sitting in the car and there was no sign of Miss Blunt. He held the pages so that he could decipher them better. The long shadows of the petrol station did not make reading easy.

With narrowed eyes, Pete struggled to read the writing on the lined sheet. The handwriting was clearly Miss Blunt’s—very small, very jagged and somewhat old-fashioned. Underneath an address in Port Hueneme was written:

*Burning Dawn*  
*Deer Creek*

*RM→WR*

The next piece of paper was a police wanted notice. The man in the photo was clearly Mr Quinn. He was accused of fraud in several cases.

Impatiently, Pete skimmed the text:

*The Sacramento Police Department is investigating a series of frauds in which companies were manipulated into making unsafe investments. The estimated loss so far is close to one million dollars. Witnesses led to the arrest of Scott Lawrence Quinn. The suspect was released on bail pending trial, but failed to appear in court on the date set and—*

Pete was so engrossed in his reading that he did not hear the footsteps behind him until it was already too late.

## 8. Bounty Hunting

“I gave you clear instructions, instead you’re rummaging through my things!” Miss Blunt narrowed her eyes to slits. A plastic shopping bag dangled over the teacher’s arm. “You’re lucky the prisoner didn’t escape.”

Pete tried to assess the danger he was in. A truck was parked within sight, and the driver was having a coffee. A little further away, a young man was refuelling a campervan. Miss Blunt wouldn’t dare attack him here. Besides, he had her stun gun. He could lie or apologize, or he could stand up for himself.

“I may not be great at maths, but I’m not stupid either,” Pete said firmly. “Therefore, I will not get involved in a ride into the unknown... especially if it might put someone in danger. I’ve asked you several times but you are not telling anything, so I have to take matters into my own hands. If you still won’t tell me something, I guess I’ll have to call Inspector Cotta of the Rocky Beach police. He can look into the case.”

“I—” the teacher began, but Pete really needed to vent.

“I may be your student at school, but we are not there now. In any case, I’m not your serf. You will certainly break a thousand laws if you force me to play your chauffeur.”

“A thousand most certainly not,” Miss Blunt said coolly, “but I admit that I am in a legal grey area.”

“So are you a bounty hunter or not?”

Miss Blunt looked at her watch. She sighed. Then she pulled something out of her pocket. It was an identity card. “See for yourself.”

“Coltstone Recovery,” Pete read aloud. “Amanda Blunt, Bail Enforcement Agent.” He left out the small print text about the rights, as well as the identification number. “Is Coltstone Recovery the company you work for?”

“Not now,” the teacher replied, “not since I graduated and was hired as a teacher. We don’t have time for the details, but I have the necessary training and still have the authority to bring this officially wanted felon to Sacramento.”

“To your former employer?”

“Yes, Vince Coltstone will take over and hand him to the authorities. Is that enough for you?”

“For the time being, yes,” Pete said.

“Good. Then please get back in the car. We still have a long way to go.”

“It smells funny.” Nancy looked around the Partymobile suspiciously. She had spontaneously joined Jupiter and Bob in the Partymobile after the short stop in El Rio West. That way they could coordinate without wasting time. Odo followed them in the pick-up. By now it was already a quarter to ten.

“It smells like scented candles,” Jupiter explained.

“Not my cup of tea,” said Nancy. “Phew, and all the way to Sacramento now? Why couldn’t they have picked a nearby destination?”

“We would have preferred that too,” Bob said.

“There are days when I doubt my choice of profession,” Nancy said with a sigh, “... today, for example.”

They had driven inland from the coast and turned onto Interstate 5 just before Santa Clarita.

“Do you actually know where exactly we have to go?” asked Nancy. “Sacramento is not exactly small.”

“Pete will send us a message at the next opportunity,” Jupiter said. He sounded confident. “We’re just going straight for the next few hours anyway. We won’t have to make a decision until just before Sacramento.”

“Maybe we’ll catch up with them,” Bob said.

“I’m afraid not,” Jupiter said. “According to my calculations, they should have a good hour’s lead. They might even be able to extend it depending on the vehicle they are travelling on. Besides, they might have taken the alternative way via State Route 99.”

“The most dangerous highway in California,” Nancy said.

Jupiter nodded. “In fact, there are claims that it is most dangerous highway in the country. One reason is because it is extremely dark.”

“Which way are you taking?” Nancy asked.

“We are definitely faster on I-5,” Jupiter interjected. “In Stockton, both highways meet again. There we can easily change to SR-99.”

Pete focused on the green signs above the freeway. They announced that the road would split. Left lanes would be SR-99 to Fresno via Bakersfield, while the right lane was for remaining on I-5 to San Francisco and Sacramento.

The Second Investigator put on his indicator and pulled into the right lane. By now it was just after 9 pm and the surrounding area was pitch dark. There were only the tail lights of the other cars. He had rolled down the driver’s side window. The desert climate ensured that the temperatures dropped significantly after sunset. The cool night wind blew in his face.

Miss Blunt had made no further statements since the incident at the rest area, but Mr Quinn was talkative. Again and again, he tried to engage his travelling companions in conversation.

Finally, Pete went into it. “So you’re a wanted criminal?” he said in his best chatty tone—as if he were talking to Quinn about the weather or a hobby.

“Let’s just say I crossed the limit of legality with one foot.”

“As a cheat?”

“I was forced to improve myself financially—just not in the conventional way.”

Miss Blunt laughed out. “You can describe it as circumstantially as you like. In any case, you’re a felon.”

“Now, now,” said Mr Quinn reprovingly, “haven’t you ever been in the unpleasant situation of having to pay bills? Don’t you have any family obligations?”

Miss Blunt made a strange sound—a mixture of coughing, loud breathing and swallowing. “It’s not about me.”

“Who knows what else you’re up to tonight,” Mr Quinn said.

“It’s already known,” Miss Blunt said. “I’m taking you to Sacramento.”

“And you, Mr Quinn?” asked Pete. “What were you doing in Port Hueneme?”

“I had an assignment there that gave me a temporary place to stay. My business made it necessary to go underground for a while.”

“You are afraid of the police,” Miss Blunt interpreted. “After all, you stayed away from your own court hearing.”

Mr Quinn laughed as if she had made a good joke. “The authorities are the least of my worries. Believe me, I would have put up with the trial but the situation didn’t allow that.”

“Who are you afraid of?” Pete wanted to know. “—The people whom you cheated?”

“This nice conversation is just turning into an interrogation,” Mr Quinn complained. “—But please... in a way, we are all in the same boat... or rather, in the same car. It’s not the deceived we have to fear, but the deceivers.”

“So it’s the people you worked with,” Pete concluded. “Are they very dangerous?”

Mr Quinn waited a surprisingly long time before answering: “I think dangerous is a gross understatement.”

## 9. More Clues From Pete

The longer the journey took, the quieter it became in the Partymobile. Nancy became monosyllabic, Bob stared out the window into the darkness, and Jupiter had to concentrate on the road. A huge moon was just creeping over the horizon but no one had eyes for the beauty of the reddish orb.

Every now and then, Bob had checked the answering machine at Headquarters, so far without success. Now he turned the radio down and left a message there himself. However, he was not sure if Pete knew the remote access code for the answering machine by heart. Meanwhile, Bob plugged in his mobile phone to a car phone charger and then connected it to the Partymobile's cigarette lighter. How long he could get his phone charged, he did not know, but he was prepared for a technical defect—not on his phone but on the car. Reluctantly, he turned the radio up again—just in case there was important news on the traffic. So far the news had been completely irrelevant.

Pete desperately needed to move. Almost two and a half hours had passed since the last stop. Nevertheless, he regretted the choice of location for the current break. This rest area would only increase his stress level.

Somewhere there was a rustling in the grass. Beyond the lit areas stretched an invisible wilderness of sand, bushes and dry trees, and that was exactly where snakes lived. To ensure that no traveller forgot this, there were signs all over the rest area. Underneath the image of an angry rattlesnake was a notice warning everyone about nocturnal animals in the vicinity.

Pete had no desire to venture to the area behind the toilets. This was not only because of the snakes, but also because of the dubious characters that were hanging around at this time of the night. Nevertheless, he had no choice. The public telephones and drinks vending machines were located here after all.

Most importantly, Pete needed to update his friends out of earshot of Mr Quinn and Miss Blunt, presumably his teacher was telling the truth. Still, a residue of suspicion remained. He couldn't gauge how she would react if he called his colleagues. Either way, she wouldn't be keen on The Three Investigators looking into the case, nor did Mr Quinn need to know that Pete was an investigator. So he had asked for a short break—ostensibly to visit the toilet and buy another Coke from the drinks machine.

He went behind the outhouse. Now it had to be quick. There was only one coin in his wallet—a 50-cent piece. He inserted it and dialled the number of Headquarters. He waited impatiently for the answering machine to start and for Jupiter's voice to recite the familiar text.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a shadow. Someone was walking close to him. The smell of cold cigarette smoke and popcorn wafted around his nose. Turning his head to the side, he spotted a tall figure stopping in front of one of the drinks machines. Pete had never seen so many tattoos on a single person. The muscular arms were plastered with dark images. There didn't seem to be a free piece of skin left on the neck either. Fewer tattoos were on the face. Instead, there was plenty of metal—in the form of rings on the nose, lips and ears.



Astonished, Pete realized that it was a woman. For a brief moment, their eyes crossed. Almost simultaneously, the beep sounded.

“Well, I...” Pete began. He could literally feel his credit getting smaller. Jupiter’s announcement had probably already swallowed a few cents. Superfluously, Pete gave the name of the rest area as if that had some informational value for his friends. He tried to concentrate better. He had to get to the point quickly but he had the feeling that he was being watched. The woman at the drinks machine was busy making a selection... or was she eavesdropping?

“Well...” Pete couldn’t afford to hesitate. “I’m okay. The man from Port Hueneme is a fraud. His name is Quinn and he’s supposed to be in prison... in Sacramento. I’ve seen the notes from Miss Blunt. I’m driving my MG to a place called ‘Burning Dawn’. I think it’s a place, anyway. It has something to do with Deer Creek and with the abbreviation ‘RM’. Then there’s an arrow pointing to ‘WR’. Or was it ‘WP’? Sheesh... I hope I have that right in my head. That’s about it. No, wait! Miss Blunt works for Coltstone—”

The connection was terminated. Pete groaned. He should have written down the text beforehand. If his friends understood even half of his frantic stammering, they really were great investigators. Hopefully Jupiter had a flash of inspiration.

Pete was endlessly frustrated. Firstly, he had fumbled on the phone; secondly, he was tired; thirdly, he was short of change for the drinks machine. He couldn’t get to the fourth point.

Someone grabbed him by the arm. The grip of a hand closed around it like a vice. Pete’s body immediately went on alert. Adrenalin pumped through his body and his muscles tensed as he was pulled to the side.

Bob was about to fall asleep when the first lights of Lost Hills appeared in front of them—shimmering coloured dots in the darkness. Soon they could read the neon advertising signs for motels, petrol stations and restaurants.

Nancy’s mobile phone rang. It was Odo, asking for a little break. That came in handy for everyone. The pink Partymobile and the pick-up truck pulled up next to each other in a large car park. Odo immediately rushed to the public toilets, while Nancy and the two boys got out of the Partymobile to take a stretch.

“Honestly, I’m worried.” She rubbed her eyes. “We’re all getting tired and it’s still a long way to Sacramento.”

“A coffee would be good,” Bob said. He also noticed that his eyelids were getting heavier. The day had been long and the last few hours had taken their toll.

“I’ll buy you a drink in a minute,” Nancy promised, “but first we should check if your friend has come forward. If not, we need a Plan B... or a Plan C or D.”

“And the rest of the alphabet,” grumbled Jupiter. He pinched his lower lip—a sign that he was thinking hard and not as tired as he pretended to be.

“Check your answering machine again, please,” Nancy asked.

Bob immediately complied with this request. For the last couple of hours, he had hoped again and again for a message from Pete, but it had failed to arrive—until now. The answering machine’s automated voice buzzed the hoped-for “You have one new message.” There was a crackle on the line, then the Second Investigator’s voice came on.

“Jackpot!” Bob called out with his mobile phone pressed firmly to his ear. Nancy made a gesture of relief. Only Jupiter continued to pinch his lower lip.

Pete was apparently at a rest area, sounding rushed and audibly struggling to summarize the most important information. At least he confirmed that the trip was to Sacramento. Bob was momentarily relieved. So they had interpreted his earlier message correctly.

The next moment, however, he raised his eyebrows when Pete started with a strange description of the place. With Nancy around, decided to keep listening quietly—just in case Pete’s message was only meant for Bob and Jupiter. Then his friend finished the message with the words: ‘Miss Blunt works for Coltstone—’

Bob lowered the phone. “I can’t really figure it out.”

“What did he say?” asked the First Investigator. He gave his friend a scanning look.

“He’s with a man named ‘Quinn’,” Bob said, “and yes, they’re heading to Sacramento.”

Nancy breathed an audible sigh of relief.

“Pete himself doesn’t know what address he’s going to,” Bob continued. “He was quite excited and said something about a place called Burning Dawn near a Deer Creek and then the initials ‘RM’ with an arrow towards ‘WR’ or ‘WP’.”

“Either it’s a mystery or very unstructured reporting,” Jupiter found as he pulled out his mobile phone.

“It really doesn’t make sense to me,” Nancy said.

“We can check it out.” The First Investigator keyed a few words into a search engine.

“Okay... there is no Burning Dawn in the greater Sacramento area.”

“And what about ‘RM’ and the rest?” asked Nancy.

Meanwhile, Odo came shuffling back to them. He nodded curtly when he reached the group.

“There seems to be a lead,” Nancy told Odo. “We now know that Quinn is on the way to Sacramento... but the exact destination is not clear.”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured. At least it sounded pleased.

Jupiter was already looking at the display again. “Okay... Deer Creek is a river in Tehama County and it flows into the Sacramento River. Then we have Deer Creek Hills Nature Preserve which is located in Sloughhouse, in eastern Sacramento County. It is one of the largest nature preserves in the Sacramento region. In the city, there’s a road called Deer Creek Drive located off Mack Road.”

“Okay,” Nancy said impatiently, “but what do the abbreviations stand for?”

“‘R’ could stand for right and ‘W’ for the compass direction ‘West’,” Bob pondered.

“Hmm...” Odo murmured. This time it was a thoughtful ‘hmm’.

“But they could also be initials or abbreviations of names, like those on letterboxes,” said Jupiter. “You would then have to search for ‘Reed Malcom’ and ‘Will Riker’, for example.”

“Who are they?” asked Odo.

“Just examples,” Jupiter explained. “They might also refer to signs or other clues that you can only figure out if you’re on the spot.” Jupiter frowned and zoomed further into the map. “I guess we can rule out the Deer Creek river in Tehama County since it’s way further north of Sacramento.”

“What about those Hills?” Nancy asked.

“Wait a minute,” Jupiter said as he moved his fingers on the display again. Nancy was looking over his shoulder as he did so, but that didn’t faze the First Investigator. “Deer Creek Hills Nature Preserve in Sloughhouse and Deer Creek Drive in the city are both in the Sacramento county.”

“So they are two possible places,” Nancy paced nervously. “We have to split up!”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured. “You and I are going together?”

“Of course,” Nancy said, “but we should draw up a plan, and keep in touch with the boys.”

Jupiter looked at the map again. “Bob and I will take the Hills, okay?”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured again.

“You could—” Nancy began.

“We shouldn’t waste any time,” Jupiter interrupted her.

Nancy looked at her hunky colleague. “Looks like it’s off to the city for us. We have a long drive ahead, so I’ll tell you what, Odo, go buy us a round of coffee first.”

“We don’t have time for coffee!” objected Jupiter.

“Coffee is good,” said Nancy, “and it keeps you awake. Get me a strong coffee, Odo.”

“Strong coffee? Are you sure?” Odo asked.

“Absolutely sure,” Nancy said with amusement. “I’ll wait here in the boys’ vehicle. There’s a fold-out table.”

“Okay,” Odo said and trotted off again.

Jupiter looked at Odo suspiciously if he had said: ‘I’ll just get a rifle and some ammunition’.

“Odo usually only talks when it’s absolutely necessary,” Nancy said cheerfully as she went inside the Partymobile.

“Hmm...” Jupiter murmured.

Bob laughed out loud, but then he noticed his friend’s penetrating gaze.

“You know what would really keep me awake?” Jupiter mumbled. “I wish I were... under the sea... under the sea...” It sounded remotely like singing. Then he dropped groaning onto a seat, yawned heartily and stretched.

Bob felt he was missing something important just then. Had Jupiter Jones, of all people, just hummed a lyric from an animated movie?

Nancy seemed to wonder the same thing. “Let me guess—you want to go swimming in the sea right now?”

Jupiter grinned. “After a refreshing swim or dive in the sea, I’d surely be fully awake—at least for a couple of hours more. Anyway, since I am nowhere near even a swimming pool, I might as well do some stretching exercises.” As he spoke, he stretched his right hand out horizontally with the palm down, and fingers extended, then he rotated his palm slowly side to side. Then he did the same with his left hand.

Bob was now watching his colleague in minute detail. Jupiter then clenched his hands into fists, drew back his arms and crossed them in front of his chest like an ‘X’. Finally, he stretched out his right arm still with his fist clenched.

Bob could only wonder what kind of exercises those were. Was it just a casual gesture? But this was uncharacteristic of Jupiter as was him humming a song.

Hold on! Bob’s mind was working. Jupiter was telling him something!

“Under the sea...” Bob thought to himself. He vaguely recalled that this was a song a red crab sang in a children’s movie. Jupiter was definitely not interested in crabs, nor in children’s songs. Maybe it really was something about the sea—specifically, under the sea—diving under the sea?

Suddenly he realized it! The Three Investigators were experienced divers. Under water, they communicated with hand signals they had learned during their diving courses. They were simple gestures that gave important messages.

Bob didn’t have to think long. The rotation of the palms indicated that ‘something is wrong’; and the crossing of the arms in an ‘X’ indicated that ‘danger is imminent’. Following

this, if an arm with a clenched fist was stretched out, it was to point in the direction of the danger.

Bob swallowed. Where Jupe's fist had been pointing a moment ago, Nancy sat smiling at him.

## 10. Jupiter's Warning

Now a defensive hold might help Pete wriggle free. The situation clearly called for retaliation. He got ready.

"That was close," said a smoky voice. Almost simultaneously, the attacker let Pete go.

The Second Investigator turned around briskly, his hands raised in defence. In front of him stood the tattooed woman.

"Stay calm!"

"What?" asked Pete, horrified. Why had the woman attacked him? His arm hurt where she had grabbed it.

"Stay calm!" she repeated. With her chin, she pointed in the direction of a rubbish bin that stood nearby.

"What do you want from me?"

"Stand still!"

"Why should I?" Pete was about to start moving again when the woman grabbed him again and pulled him along.

"Stop right there! Or do you want to be bitten?"

"Bitten?" Pete asked, confused, but then he looked over at the bin again and understood what was going on. A slender head slid across the ground, followed by a long body. "A rattlesnake!"

"Exactly," the woman said gruffly, "and you were going to walk right past it."

"Are you okay?" An older man came around the corner and looked at Pete and the woman in wonder.

"Yes, but watch out," said the woman. "There's a snake next to the bin!"

"I hate snakes." The man turned on his heel.

"We should go too, before the beast gets any more ideas about crawling in our direction." They ran back.

"Thank you," Pete said.

"You're welcome," the woman replied, "and always remember—if you're out at night, you should be on the lookout for danger."

"I was distracted."

"I noticed that." The woman sounded concerned. "For a teenager to be out on the highway at this hour, you're obviously up to your neck in some kind of trouble."

"I'll manage," Pete said, but was not very convincing. Apparently the woman had overheard his phone call. "I'm not a criminal and I don't do anything crooked. I'm an investigator. My only problem is that I don't have money for the drinks machine."

"I'm Melody Sweetwater, Queen of the Highway!" She pulled the can of drink she had just bought from the pocket of her vest. "Soda. You can have it. I'll buy another one as soon as the beast has gone. Anyway, I've got to take my mandatory break before I get the truck back on the road."

"Thanks again!" said Pete in surprise.

"Good luck!" the woman called to him and headed towards the truck park.

In the MG, he was impatiently awaited. At first, Miss Blunt seemed suspicious. However, she believed Pete's story about the snake. The Second Investigator started the engine.

"Snakes," Mr Quinn said in disgust. "You never know where they're hiding... and when you least expect it, they strike."

Bob was sure that Jupiter had warned him about Nancy. However, he did not yet understand why.

They had overheard Nancy and Odo in the half-finished house after all. The two of them were investigators. Their story sounded plausible and they were on the same side... or was Nancy planning to solve the case single-handedly to ensure that only she got the fee? However, that didn't make sense as Jupiter and Bob made it known that they weren't in for money. Besides, Nancy and Odo couldn't solve the case at all without Pete's clues, so they were dependent on the boys' cooperation.

"Coffee!"

Bob looked up in surprise. He had been so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed that Odo had returned holding a carrier with four takeaway cups with plastic lids.

Quickly Nancy unfolded the small table in the Partymobile so that Odo could put the drinks down. Bob sat opposite Juve, whereas Nancy went to the back seat. With Odo around, it was cramped inside the car, but Bob hardly noticed. He was still deep in thought.

Odo removed the cups from the carrier and placed them on the table. Then he handed Nancy a cup.

Suddenly, Jupiter sneezed with all his might. As he did so, the First Investigator jerked his knees up, bumping the table top and causing the three remaining cups to tremble dangerously. Then he stood up awkwardly from his seat to get a hold of the cups before any of them toppled over. "Whew! Goodness, I didn't mean to do that!"

Bob had never seen his friend so clumsy.

"It's okay," Nancy said. "Let's finish our drinks so we can go."

"Hmm..." Odo murmured. Jupiter watched as Odo grabbed his cup, sat down next to Nancy, and downed the hot liquid like a shot of brandy.

Meanwhile, Bob had peeled away the small section of the lid for the mouth-size opening. Then he had taken one sip of the steaming drink. He had found the coffee hot and far too strong. Nevertheless, he dared to take a second, larger sip, when at that moment, Jupiter happened to glance over at him.

This time Bob really hurt. However, it was not the hot coffee that was to blame, but the foot that hit him hard on the shin. He almost spat the drink out. Jupiter had kicked him under the table!

Bob wanted to take the third sip, but the throbbing in his shin made him recall that when Jupiter did something, there was always a good reason for it. The First Investigator didn't usually kick around, and he didn't cause tables to wobble.

Bob put his cup down and saw that the First Investigator had his arms crossed in front of this chest like an 'X' again. Now, Bob was sure—Juve had once again given him the 'danger is imminent' signal.

"Is the coffee enough for you?" asked Nancy.

"Hmm..." Odo murmured. He had leaned back against the seat and closed his eyes. In fact, he was also smiling contentedly.

Bob blinked. All at once, he also felt the tiredness he had suppressed for so long.

“Hey, Odo!” said Nancy. “What’s wrong with you? That coffee was supposed to wake you up.”

Bob leaned back. It was as if he was slowly drifting into weightlessness. Everything was as light as in a dream—an infinite dream. Then he hummed softly to himself: “Under the sea... under the sea...”

“Are you okay?” Nancy asked Bob. She sounded as if she were talking underwater.

Bob smiled at her. She had really pretty eyes—with very long dark eyelashes.

“—Like a deer,” Bob muttered. Had he said that out loud?

Then someone grabbed him by the shoulder. “I need water!” he heard Jupe say.

What was going on here? Bob had lost track of everything, but the lights outside in the car park were shimmering beautifully. He turned slowly and caught sight of Jupiter. He had pretty eyes too.

“Cold water, on the face,” murmured the First Investigator. “That’ll help with the tiredness. Come with me, Bob.”

“Wait a minute, guys.” Nancy’s voice was now uncomfortably loud. She gave her colleague a firm nudge. “Odo! Wake up!”

“Oh, shut up, you old buffoon...” Odo grunted. “I’m taking a nap right now...”

“Are you coming, Bob?” Jupiter asked again.

“You stay here!” Nancy suddenly didn’t sound nice at all. The next moment, she took out a gun and pointed it at Jupe.

## 11. "Silence is Blood-Red"

"The strong coffee..." Jupiter began. "I thought strong coffee is more likely to keep you awake than asleep, like Odo is now."

Nancy stared at him. "You switched the coffee cups!"

"Indeed I have..." Jupiter confirmed. "Odo—which is probably not his real name—has obviously put something in the coffee."

"Very clever... very clever..." Nancy remarked.

"I had to assume that it would be something to either knock us out or make us talk," Jupiter continued. "Unfortunately, you didn't count on me taking the hint. His own potion put him down."

"It doesn't matter to me now." Nancy leaned forward menacingly. "I prefer to work alone—without that bungling fool."

"What did Odo put in the coffee?" Jupe asked.

"A drug that was actually intended for our target."

"What does it do?"

"It fogs consciousness and clouds judgement. Small amounts make you talkative, large amounts make you very tired. The effect soon fades. Your friend has hardly drunk any of it. Anyway, I can still get him to talk."

"Talk is silver, silence is gold." Bob smiled faithfully at the woman.

"Talk is gold, silence is blood-red," she replied.

"We have nothing to hide," Bob said in a sleepy voice.

"Don't say anything, Bob!" Jupiter called out.

"You sit down and shut up!" Nancy instructed and pointed her gun at the First Investigator. "—Otherwise, you'll be the one that's not going to say anything—forever!"

Then Nancy turned back to Bob. "Okay, Bob, who are you guys?"

"We are investigators—The Three Investigators, and 'We Investigate Anything'."

"How did your other friend Pete get into this?"

Bob sighed theatrically. "By accident."

"Do you know what kind of car they are in?"

Bob swayed slightly. "Should be Pete's MG... at least I think so. Yeah... he did say that."

"Car colour?"

"Such a red one with little space," Bob murmured. "I—"

"Licence plate number?" Nancy interrupted, and Bob promptly gave her the information.

Jupiter had to do something before Bob revealed more to Nancy. Since the First Investigator could not physically interfere, he decided to talk to Nancy, at least to try to divert her attention: "You wanted to get rid of us, but your plan failed because I saw through you in time."

"I don't think so," Nancy replied, "but of course I'd like to know how you found out about us. Was it Odo's stupidity?"

"It was the sum of several observations," Jupiter said. "You avoided telling us the name of your target the whole time. Only after Bob had learned the man's name from Pete's



message, did you say the last name 'Quinn'. From this, I conclude that you either wanted to prevent us from doing background research or didn't know the name yourself because there is no old Mrs Quinn looking for her son."

"Aha!" Nancy remarked. It sounded threatening.

"Then there were two minor observations," Jupiter continued. "Although you claimed to run an investigation agency, you didn't tell us the name of the agency, nor did you show us a business card. Then I also observed that your subsequent actions did not align with... uh... how shall I put it? Let's say, you didn't act like hardened professional sleuths.

"Nevertheless, it was your reaction to Pete's last message that gave me a brief moment of realization. I suspect you now know where you should be heading—namely, Deer Creek Hills Nature Preserve. That also seemed obvious to me after a close look at the map and I decided to choose that destination and suggested that you take the other place in the city. You, on the other hand, could not allow that, so you gave Odo the go-ahead to stop us—with the strong coffee. To confirm, he asked whether you are sure of it."

"Hmm..." Odo murmured. "So... true... strong... coffee..."

"That's enough!" Nancy turned back to Bob. "Where is Quinn?"

"I don't know any queen," Bob muttered.

"What else do you know?" Nancy continued unperturbed.

"Nothing really... except that... we are just looking for Pete. He said... Sacramento... and those letters... uh... R-M... or was it... R-O... uh... T-F-L? And arrows..."

"You heard it," Jupiter said quietly. "We just got caught up in it."

"Indeed convenient for me," said Nancy. "I have all the info and now a hostage—you! I don't think even a serious bounty hunter is going to risk the life of a teenager to collect a reward."

"Bounty hunter?" Jupe wondered.

Nancy laughed dryly. "Who else would be after Quinn? Now come with me."

"You can't make me."

"I have a gun, you don't." Nancy's voice was cold.

"Gum?" Bob said with glazed eyes. "I sure would like some chewing gum..."

Nancy jumped up. "I'm giving the orders here!"

There was no point in objecting. Jupiter only had to wait for a favourable opportunity to trick Nancy. Until then, he would have to dance to her tune—whether he liked it or not.

With her gun still pointing at Jupe, she rummaged around in the drawers and the compartments under the back seat. There she found pieces of colourful tape. On it was written 'Attention! Party Zone!'

She handed several pieces of the tape to Jupiter and instructed: "Tie them up and don't try anything funny."

Jupe did as told. He wrapped the tape around Bob's and Odo's wrists and ankles and Nancy inspected his work in the process.

"Now take both their mobile phones and your backpacks and then come with me." She grabbed the remaining tape and went out of the Partymobile.

Tied up like a package, Bob leaned back. "This is uncomfortable!"

"You'll survive," Nancy said.

"—Not if they lie here until tomorrow," said Jupiter. "The car heats up quickly in the sun."

"If you're a good boy, you can come back here tomorrow to rescue these two—before the sun turns the car into a sauna. Now come out and close the door!"

Jupiter nodded submissively. His options were limited, but then he figured that there was one thing he could do. As he got out, he placed his backpack on the ground. With the backpack blocking Nancy's view, he let the car key drop under the side door.

White lines, yellow lines and grey road surface appeared within the beam of the MG's headlights—that was all Pete saw. His head felt strangely empty while his eyelids grew heavier. He had rolled down the window. It was only the cool wind that stood between him and sleep. Nothing else kept him awake. Even Quinn had stopped talking.

A glance in the rear-view mirror told Pete that the man had fallen asleep. He lay hunched over in the back seat, eyes closed, breathing steady and even. Miss Blunt was still awake, but staring silently out the window at the unfamiliar landscape.

Somewhere in the distance blurred lights appeared, blinked, merged into a single point and then faded. It all reminded Pete of an expedition in space. The MG was not travelling, it was literally flying.

The spherical sounds of the electronic music from the radio also seemed to float through the car. Miss Blunt had chosen the station and Pete didn't bother to change to another one. Maybe that sort of music would keep her awake. At least an announcement came now and then... like now: "Here is a traffic announcement... A truck has broken down and is blocking northbound traffic on Interstate 5 just before Exit 403A to Los Banos. So drive carefully and if necessary, detour at Exit 391 onto State Route 165—Merced Springs Road. We'll keep you updated."

"That's where we're heading," Miss Blunt said quietly.

"I know," Pete replied.

That was the end of the conversation and they both listened to the radio presenter: "That's it for the traffic news. Back to the big synth-pop revival night! The full moon is shining, the wolves are howling and we're going back in time—with a classic from the 80s of the last century—*In the Middle of the Night*."

The distorted sounds of the electronic music reinforced the impression of flying a spaceship through infinite space. Crewman Crenshaw was light years away from his home planet, exploring alien worlds and doing something in some galaxy—isolated, alone, with an aching neck and a numb feeling in his fingers.

*In the Middle of the Night* faded away and was replaced by another synth-pop number. Dark carpets of sound floated through the MG, but even this kind of music couldn't keep Pete's eyelids from growing heavy. He fought fatigue. Suddenly, soothing red lights shimmered in front of him. Slowly they became more—like red fireflies in the dark. Slowly they faded away...

All of a sudden, the red lights were back! There they were—right before his eyes! There was no way he was going to fall asleep!

"Slow down!" Miss Blunt's voice cut through the silence.

Pete jerked his head up. Tail lights! Of course! Those were tail lights!

"Brake, Pete!"

Adrenalin flooded his body and drove away the tiredness in one fell swoop. His head rattled. His thoughts were almost flying over each other. Directly in front of Pete was the end of a traffic jam.

Traffic jam? Trucks! Interstate 5! Drive carefully! Detour? Now? Here?

In a minute, the MG would hit the vehicle in front of them at full speed!

## 12. Equation With Three Unknowns

Pete jerked the steering wheel around. The MG screeched, skidded over sand and gravel and narrowly missed a sign post.

The Second Investigator and his passengers were shaken. The MG sped onto an exit ramp where it almost collided with another car. Someone blared the horn. Lights flickered on.

Pete slammed on the brakes. The seatbelt jerked him violently back into the seat and his head hit the headrest. The MG squealed and groaned until it came to a complete stop. A car drove close to them and blared the horn.

“Well, that’s what we get for having a boy at the wheel.” Mr Quinn had woken up.

Miss Blunt ignored him and said: “Drive on.” There was a slight tremor in her voice, but she had already regained her composure. “This detour will lead to SR-99.”

“I...” Pete said, “I need a break.”

“You can’t stop here, otherwise there will be an accident. Drive on!”

Pete obeyed. With his heart pounding, he stepped on the accelerator. A sign announced that the road to the right was Mercey Springs Road leading to Los Banos. To the left, the road led into the middle of nowhere.

“Turn right,” Miss Blunt ordered.

Pete turned off and drove into another dark plain.

“You can stop up ahead there,” Miss Blunt said as the headlights illuminated a stretch of gravel by the side of the road. “We’ll swap.”

“Can you manage it?” asked Pete. “I mean, the manual transmission.”

Miss Blunt snorted. “I should be okay on a lonely country road. From now on, you look after Mr Quinn. Can you manage it?”

Mr Quinn nodded in amusement. “I’m sure Spider-Boy has the situation under control—until something happens again.”

“Just ignore him,” Miss Blunt told Pete. “He’s devious, immoral and not to be trusted.”

“Thank you,” Mr Quinn said.

“I’ll get out and go over to your side,” Miss Blunt told Pete. “Then you slide over to the passenger seat. Don’t let him out of your sight!”

Mr Quinn watched with a mild smile as his fellow passengers swapped places. Pete expected Quinn to attack at any moment but he continued to show his poker face.

As the teacher took a seat behind the wheel, Quinn cleared his throat. “You could say something nice for a change, by the way. This negative attitude is very demotivating. Are you always like that at school?”

“That’s none of your business,” Miss Blunt snapped.

“But I am curious. Let me guess—Pete would like to improve his grades in school.”

“How do you know that?” asked Pete in amazement.

“Don’t get into a conversation with him,” Miss Blunt told Pete.

“I’d say don’t listen to her,” Mr Quinn said as Miss Blunt started the engine and immediately stalled. “To answer your question, I’m a good listener and a master deducer.”

The MG yelped, and then started moving.

“Ha!” Miss Blunt laughed. “I’ll drive on... and you at the back seat better use the time to sleep.”

“We have just survived a thoroughly dangerous situation,” Mr Quinn said. “I can’t sleep again until I am satisfied that you are a good driver.”

“I am a good driver.”

“Anyway I’m awake now. Let’s use the time for a little talk about mathematics. That would also be in your student’s interest.”

“Not really,” Pete said.

“Mathematics can be exciting,” said Mr Quinn. “Surely you’ve already learned the basics of algebra.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Miss Blunt said.

“He can hear you,” Mr Quinn warned, “but back to you, Pete. Mathematics is an enjoyable subject. It works with general laws. Even an unknown in an equation can be determined using the rules and laws. It’s a solvable puzzle, so to speak.”

“There are definitely unsolvable problems in mathematics,” Miss Blunt interjected.

“Not in basic high school maths,” Quinn countered. “My point is that maths is logical, and something that is logical can be understood.”

Pete had to think of Jupiter. With this ability, his friend not only did homework, but solved criminal cases. Logic was the First Investigator’s great strength. Jupiter would have had this situation under control long ago. He would have seen through Quinn. Instead, it was now Quinn who saw through his travelling companions.

“I am an unknown in this equation,” Quinn said promptly. “So let’s call me ‘X’... but in this equation, there are other unknowns and so that makes things difficult.”

“Are you talking about your accomplices?” asked Pete.

“Now, now, not so fast, buddy,” Mr Quinn reprimanded with a satisfied grin. He clearly liked himself in the role of a teacher. “We should stick to the common names used for unknowns, for example, ‘Y’ and ‘Z’ instead of ‘accomplices’. You know, Pete, it’s about eliminating one unknown after the other... and eliminate, in the end, means nothing other than eradicate.”

“Be careful I don’t eliminate you,” Miss Blunt said.

“Not at all,” Mr Quinn interjected. “‘Y’ and ‘Z’ are already planning to do that. You may be tough, but against ‘Y’ you are nothing more than an extra in a *Fast & Furious* movie.”

“Does that mean ‘Y’ wants to hurt you?” Pete had a vague idea of what Mr Quinn was getting at.

“I live dangerously,” said Mr Quinn, “but that’s not the point. If you keep interrupting, I can’t explain to you how to solve equations.”

The Second Investigator gave up for the time being. He and Miss Blunt listened to Mr Quinn lecturing away in high glee. Pete feared that it would be the longest maths lesson of his life. If not for Quinn’s occasional wisecracks, the Second Investigator would have long fallen asleep at the wheel.

Jupiter lay between a few old blankets on the hard surface of the cargo area of Nancy’s pick-up truck. He was bound with the same ‘Party Zone’ tape around his wrists and ankles.

He stared at the sky. The full moon illuminated individual stripes of clouds. Pale stars twinkled between them. Under normal circumstances, it would have been a beautiful night, but the circumstances were not normal.

When Jupiter Jones thought about the last few hours, he had to admit that he had failed. He had only reacted to most events instead of actively directing them.

At Lost Hills, Nancy had forced him to climb onto the cargo area. Help had been nowhere in sight. Then she had knocked him out with one well-aimed blow. So much for the plan to trick her. His back hurt, as well as his head after getting a bump.

Nancy, meanwhile, sat comfortably in the cab and drove the pick-up north. She had the radio on full blast and the music was wafting in uneven wisps through the open windows until an announcer's voice rang out: "Attention all motorists... A large truck has broken down on the northbound lane on Interstate 5 just before Exit 403A to Los Banos. Better slow down. If necessary, detour at Exit 391 onto Mercey Springs Road. If you end up in a traffic jam, we'll continue to provide you with the best dance hits ever." Already the music was swelling again.

Nancy reacted to the news with an abrupt lane change. The pick-up slowed down and changed direction. Jupiter assumed that Nancy was just getting off Interstate 5. In fact, she slowed down even more, almost stopped, and then accelerated again. A glance at the sky told Jupiter that they were now heading directly north.

Jupiter recalled, when he was looking at the map of this area earlier, that there was a network of lonely country roads here. They were seemingly endless country roads between fields and plantations, occasionally interrupted by small towns. Obviously at this late hour, no one was on the road.

The First Investigator had to keep a clear head. Because of the traffic jam, Nancy had changed the route. That was certainly a good idea, but the diversions would cost them time. With some delay, they would eventually reach SR-99—the alternative route to Stockton and onwards to Sacramento.

At that moment, Nancy pulled over. The music stopped.

"Hey, Brutus," she said.

What followed could hardly be heard by Jupiter despite the open car windows. Apparently his abductor was speaking to someone on the phone.

"Yes, I know it's late!" she spoke a little louder now. "Get out of the club! I can hardly hear you!"

A moment later, she continued to speak: "That's better. I've got a job for you around your area... No, it can't wait. I need you to stop a car for me! MG, red," and she gave him the licence plate number. "Never mind... Yes!"

Jupiter couldn't hear what she said next.

Fortunately, Nancy spoke up again shortly afterwards: "—Go on the lookout! ... Yes! Right there! Go on, Brutus. Remember, the man has to stay alive—at least to the point where he can still talk. Can you do that?"

A couple of knocks woke Bob. He had no idea whether he had just dozed off or slept for a long time. His head ached and he felt woozy.

What had happened? After what felt like an eternity, it dawned on him that he had been given a sleeping pill or something similar. Odo, lying on the back seat, had been hit much harder. He was still deep in the land of dreams.

Bob found his hands and ankles bound. It was not the first time he had found himself in such a predicament, so he saw no reason to panic yet. All he needed was a sharp object. With it, he could cut the tape on his hands. Attentively, he searched his surroundings.

Suddenly, there were more knocks—on the side door. Bob flinched, startled.

“Hello? Are you all right in there?” It was a girl’s voice coming from outside.

“Not quite,” cried Bob.

“There’s a key on the ground here. It looks like a car key. Is it yours?”

“What?” asked Bob.

Someone shook the door, which opened shortly afterwards. The light from a nearby street lamp flooded the interior. Bob saw a figure standing just outside the door.

“I guess you could use some help.” It was indeed a girl barely older than Bob. She wore yellow sunglasses and a black jacket. Her long hair was light blonde. In fact, she looked as if she was a member of a motorcycle club.

“We were tied up,” Bob explained redundantly.

The girl did not seem the least bit surprised. Rather, she looked around inside and noted that Odo was snoozing away. “I saw that you were left here by a woman. There was a boy with her. It all seemed very strange, almost like an abduction.”

“It is, actually,” Bob replied. “What else did you see?”

“She made him go up to the cargo area of the pick-up. Then she knocked him out, and tied him up before leaving.”

“My goodness,” groaned Bob, slightly dazed. “I’ve gotta do something.”

“What happened to you in here?” the girl asked.

“Someone put something in my drink... but I’m all right now.”

“How did you get into this situation?” the girl asked and set about pulling the tape off Bob’s wrists.

“My friends and I are investigators.” The words bubbled out of Bob before he could stop himself. “We were supposed to be shadowing a teacher... Then things got out of hand.”

“Investigators?” the girl wondered. “—And I suppose this is your ‘Mystery Machine’?” She eyed the pink Partymobile.

“Mystery machine?” Bob wondered.

“Yes,” she said, “like Scooby Doo’s van.”

“Ha! Ha!” Bob laughed. “This vehicle belongs to my friend—the one who was abducted. The only mystery about it is how it was able to run that far here without breaking up!”

“What about him?” the girl asked. She nodded in Odo’s direction.

“He’s probably one of the bad guys.”

“Okay.” The girl helped Bob to stand up.

“I need to move a bit.” Bob got out of the Partymobile. He breathed in and out deeply. The cool night air did him good. He did some exercises to get his circulation going again.

“By the way, what are you doing out here at this hour?” Bob asked.

“My motorbike ran out of petrol,” the girl explained. “It’s parked a short distance over there.”

“Where are you going?” Bob asked.

“North... Are you also going north by any chance?” The girl looked at him hopefully.

“I don’t know,” Bob answered truthfully. He was feeling much better by now, but he certainly wasn’t fit to drive yet. Should he continue driving at all? He had to call the police, even though he would certainly clash with Inspector Kershaw.

Bob opened the passenger door and looked around the front of the car. His backpack and mobile phone were gone.

“Right now, I really need to make a phone call. Can I use your mobile?”

“Flat battery,” she apologized.

“Oh no!” asked Bob. “Maybe Odo has a mobile phone with him.” He was already climbing back through the side door. The big man gave a snore as Bob reached into his jacket

pockets. The search was unsuccessful. Apparently Nancy had also taken everything from her accomplice.

Now, he needed someone who was capable of driving a car, at least until he could think straight again. “Do you have a car driver’s licence?” he asked the girl.

The girl nodded. “Yes, but no car.”

“I have to go to Sacramento,” Bob explained. “I need someone to drive me there until I get my head straight.”

“I can do it,” the girl said. “I only have a favour though.”

“What would that be?” Bob asked.

“I need to bring my motorbike along, in your vehicle.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Bob said. “There should be enough space in here, even with that bozo sleeping on the back seat. Anyway, I have to check what I can use as a ramp to get your bike in there.”

Bob opened the back door of the vehicle and searched the storage compartment. He took out several boxes of scented candles and a tool box.

“Bingo!” he exclaimed. “Here is a portable aluminium access ramp—just what we need.”

He took out the ramp and fixed it at the side door.

“Now let’s go get your bike,” Bob said. “By the way, I’m Bob Andrews—student and private investigator from Rocky Beach.”

“I’m Lyn from San Diego, a freshman in college and a part-time waitress,” the girl said.

“So what are you doing way out here?”

“Thought I have a bit of an adventure, and at the same time, visit some friends,” Lyn replied.

“Doesn’t it bother you at all that we’re in the middle of a criminal case?”

“It’s okay.” She laughed.

The reached Lyn’s motorbike parked at the side of the road. Both of them pushed it back to the Partymobile.

Bob groaned. “What a bummer. Pete’s gone, Jupe is abducted, I have no phone, no money and no idea exactly where to go.”

“Maybe we should interrogate him,” Lyn said turning her head to Odo.

“He won’t talk,” Bob said.

“How do you know? We just have to wake him up. Just pour water over his head... and then ask him.”

“Will it work?”

“Are you the investigator or am I?” asked Lyn. “You must know some great interrogation techniques. With the right questions, you can get him to confess to anything.”

“It would be nice,” Bob said. “I can try it.”

Lyn rummaged around in her backpack and took out her water bottle. She took one gulp of water and then handed the bottle to Bob. “Pour this on his head, and then he’ll talk!”

### 13. The Interrogation

“Hey, Odo!” Bob called out as he poured water over the big man’s head.

“Mmmft!” Odo flinched.

“Odo!” Bob called out again, and patted the man on his cheeks.

“Who’s Odo?” Odo snorted and grumbled. “I want to sleep.”

“Not now!” said Bob. “I have a few questions, then you can go back to sleep.”

“Hmm...” Odo murmured. “Who are you?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Bob said. “What was in the coffee? Sleeping pills?”

“Hmm... truth... things.”

“Truth serum?”

“Uh... yes,” Odo went on.

“Your partner has left,” Bob said. “She’s not on your side. Now you have only one way out. You have to cooperate with me, otherwise I’ll call the police.”

Odo nodded weakly and actually began to talk. Nevertheless, Bob’s patience was severely tested. It took quite a while before any context emerged from the mumbled answers to his questions. Lyn stood outside the side door but did not interfere in the interrogation.

“By the way, what is your name?” Bob asked.

“My name is secret.”

“Yeah?” Bob remarked. “—But what do people call you?”

“Bison,” Odo mumbled.

“So you are Bison. What kind of a name is that?” Bob wondered.

Odo mumbled something intelligible.

“Doesn’t matter. I guess is an alias,” Bob continued. “So I suppose Nancy is also not called ‘Nancy’ and is not an investigator either. What is she called?”

“Snake,” Odo continued to mumble.

“What?” Bob cried. “We thought the woman we were chasing was Snake.”

“No. I know nothing about that woman.” Odo’s eyelids fluttered.

“Don’t fall asleep,” Bob commanded. “Then how did Nancy... that is, your accomplice, even know that the woman existed?”

“She overheard you,” Odo mumbled. His eyes fluttered shut.

“Hey! Don’t fall asleep! Where did Nancy—or whatever her name is—overhear us?”

“At the construction site. The windows were open.”

Bob had to think of the rustling plastic sheets. Of course! That had been Nancy. She had overheard Jupiter and Bob’s conversation in the house and used the information to deceive them.

In the next few minutes, Odo reluctantly—and very slowly—confessed that he belonged to a gang that specialized in fraud. Their boss was called Hawk. He had founded the gang, given all the members aliases and made the plans. None of them knew the real names and addresses of the others. They kept in contact with prepaid mobile phones they received from Hawk with every assignment. Now Hawk had died, and since then there had been trouble in the gang. Two factions had formed.



"That means Bison and Snake worked as a team until tonight," Bob repeated to make sure. "—And who else is there?"

Odo snorted gruffly. "I want to sleep!"

"I'm calling the police."

"Coyote... and... Possum," Odo muttered. "They tricked us... and then—"

"That's a whole zoo of people!" Bob remarked.

"We're the Prairie Gang," Odo muttered.

"Are you looking for Coyote or Possum?" Bob asked.

"Coyote. He tricked us." Odo sat up straighter. "He got cocky without Hawk. Took the loot all by himself. We looked all over for him... Then Snake found out he got caught... by the cops."

"—But that's not where the story ends, right?" Bob asked.

"Yeah," Odo confirmed. "Coyote was out on bail. We didn't know where he was... Then Snake got a photo that put pressure on him. A message, a little bluff and he panicked. He was about to give us the loot."

"—Which he did not do."

"Yeah... he wanted to negotiate the Pup's safety."

"The Pup?" asked Bob in amazement. "Another member of the Prairie Gang?"

"Nah..." Odo waved it off. "Coyote's Pup... his child..." He yawned and leaned back again.

"Ask him where you're supposed to go," Lyn spoke up. "Sacramento is big."

"Hey!" Bob demanded. "Deer Creek—does that mean anything to you? Think!"

"Hmm..."

"'RM', 'WP' or 'WR'?"

"Bunch of letters."

"Burning Dawn?"

Odo looked up slowly. "I know that one."

"Really?" Bob remembered that Odo had gone to the public toilet at Lost Hills when they had discussed Pete's message. "What's Burning Dawn?"

"A ranch... where Possum lives."

"Where is this ranch?"

"Sacramento County, somewhere near Folsom. That fool's a rodeo rider. Always bragging about it. I think his name is Newman..."

"Do you know his exact address?"

"Nah... but Snake knows... I only planted a tracking device in his car... but Snake followed it. After she forced Possum to tell her where Coyote was, she and I went straight to Port Hu... Hue... Port whatever..."

By now, Bob had got enough information from Odo. The big guy had already said much more when he was half-asleep than when he was awake.

Bob turned to Lyn and said: "I have some clues to the ranch from my friend Pete, but we'll never find it without a mobile phone."

"You don't need a mobile phone for that!" Lyn was indignant. "I've got maps with me—those old-fashioned paper things. Hard to fold, but readable even in dead spots. Wait, I'll get it and check."

Lyn reached for a velvet bag hanging from her backpack and rummaged around in it. Then she pulled out a folded map. "Tadaa! Northern California in all its glory."

She handed him the map and Bob looked at the crumpled paper with tired eyes. A large coffee stain covered parts of San Francisco. Sacramento County, fortunately, could be made

out perfectly.

Bob found Deer Creek Hills Nature Preserve in Sloughhouse—the place Jupiter had suggested as a destination. Then Bob sucked in an audible breath. “‘RM’ and ‘WR’! That’s it!”

“Excuse me?” asked Lyn.

“These are the directions to go there—to Burning Dawn, which is a ranch,” Bob exclaimed enthusiastically. “We have to take the country road from ‘RM’—that’s Rancho Murieta—to ‘WR’—that’s White Rock—which is southeast of Folsom, the place that Odo just mentioned.”

“Who’s Odo?” the big man mumbled.

“I’ll drive you there,” Lyn offered.

Bob looked at the girl in surprise. “To the middle of nowhere?”

“Why not? I’m in for a little adventure.”

“—But we’re still a good four hours away,” Bob warned. “Rather more, considering that this car is a real snail.”

“If we can just find a good radio station, I’ll be okay,” Lyn said.

“Okay, let’s get your bike in here and then go!”

## 14. Car Chase Along a Country Road

It was almost 2 am. Just before reaching Sacramento city, the MG left SR-99 and headed northeast towards Rancho Murieta.

Pete was at the wheel again and drove at a reduced speed through the barely inhabited landscape. Even though the route was quite straight, he had to be careful not to drive his MG into one of the trees that sometimes grew quite close to the road. He also had to watch out for wild animals crossing.

About fifteen minutes later, just before Rancho Murieta, Miss Blunt directed Pete to turn left onto a narrower road and proceed to go north. At least, there were no other road users far and wide. At this time of day, the few residents in the area were still asleep. So it surprised Pete all the more when a bulky SUV appeared at the side of the road. With its lights off, it was parked in the pale moonlight. Presumably the driver needed a break. However, no sooner had the MG passed than the SUV's headlights flashed on—two bright spots of light on the radiator grille and a row of lamps on the roof.

Pete noticed a tugging feeling in his stomach. Something was wrong. "That car—" he began.

"What is it?" asked Miss Blunt.

"I think we are being followed."

The teacher glanced in the rear-view mirror. "Quite possibly. The car is coming closer pretty fast."

"Then we have to be even faster," Pete decided.

As the MG accelerated, Miss Blunt glanced in the rear-view mirror again. "Are those your accomplices?"

Mr Quinn now looked around as well. "All I see are headlights."

"—Or are they the people who are after you?" asked Miss Blunt, now much more sharply.

"Probably. It would be good if they didn't get too close."

A curve appeared in front of them. The MG swept to the left at far too high a speed. Loose gravel splashed up as the wheels slid over the edge of the road. Pete had to counter-steer in order not to lose control. With trembling fingers, he clutched the steering wheel as if it were a life preserver. The trees flew past them in distorted shadows. With lights flickering, the SUV's engine roared far too close behind them.

Pete winced. Something shot across the road in the headlights of the MG. The Second Investigator jerked the wheel around and drove across the yellow median. Eyes flashed, then the animal disappeared into the thicket. The MG lurched briefly, then roared on in its own lane, but the manoeuvre had reduced their lead.

"Faster!" demanded Miss Blunt.

"Hold on!" said Pete. Then he jammed down the accelerator. The MG sped through the night as if it were a race car in a competition. Only when they reached a series of sharp turns did Pete slow down. The other vehicle apparently did too, because when they had got back onto a straight road, the headlights of the SUV were no longer visible.

"Did we lose him?" asked Pete, puzzled.

“No,” came from Mr Quinn. “He’s driving without lights now.”

Pete just perceived a dark shadow behind them, then an impact followed. The MG vibrated.

“He’s ramming us,” Mr Quinn said redundantly.

There was another bang. Metal crunched. Now the SUV started an overtaking manoeuvre. When it was next to them, it began to shove the much lighter MG off the road.

“Look out!” shouted Miss Blunt. “There’s a bridge in front!”

Pete saw the white railing rushing towards him. He energetically steered the MG against the pursuer. Side by side they crossed the bridge. The engine howled but Pete did not let himself be distracted. The other driver was only focussing on forcing the MG off the road. Maybe the Second Investigator could use that to his advantage.

After the river, Pete steered sharply to the right. The MG bumped over rocks and low brush. The off-road vehicle roared after him without braking. Again it hit the bumper of the MG, but Pete bravely stepped on the accelerator and sped towards a rock that marked the entrance to a ranch. He suddenly swerved, skidded past the rock with a hair’s breadth and darted onto a grass area. The pursuer saw the trick too late. His SUV rammed onto the rock with an ugly crunch.

Pete turned the MG around and steered it back on the road. As he drove past, he took a quick look at the pursuer’s car. It was a massive SUV without airbags, but the driver seemed unhurt. The bull bar on the radiator grille had lessened the impact. However, the front undercarriage of the car was jammed on the rock.

The driver threatened them with his fist, but Pete sighed with relief.

“Drive on,” Miss Blunt urged. “Don’t let him call for backup or get back on the road faster than we’d like.”

After the scare, Pete had to realize that his MG had not survived the attack very well. Although they were still driving reasonably straight along the country road, the MG sounded as if it would disintegrate into its component parts at any moment. It rattled, groaned and vibrated. The Second Investigator feared that the body was badly battered. The wheel rims were probably also damaged. The worst thing, however, was a persistent metallic grinding noise. Something had come loose and was now hanging down onto the road. It had to be the exhaust pipe!

The terrible certainty followed after only a short time. A clang sounded, followed by a loud roar. The MG made a hell of a noise.

“Don’t stop!” admonished Miss Blunt.

“The exhaust pipe has come off!” the Second Investigator cried. “I can’t leave it lying on the road.”

“Then that SUV guy will get us!” interjected Mr Quinn.

However, Pete had had enough. He was the driver and it was all about his car. If they were going to keep driving down the dark, lonely road, he had to make sure the car was still remotely drivable.

He pulled over and switched on the hazard lights. He then got out and noticed that the rear lights were no longer working. Angrily, he marched back down the road and kicked the smoking exhaust pipe onto the gravel at the side of the road. It was already cooling down, but was still too hot to touch.

Disgruntled, Pete jogged back to his battered MG and got back in. “We can drive, but I’m not making any guarantees about how long this will last. Either the car will break down or we’ll be stopped by the police.”

“It will be fine,” Miss Blunt said tonelessly.

However, she was wrong. A little further on, the car declared the journey over. It said goodbye with a strange ‘nerff’ that sounded almost human.

Pete groaned and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. “Cattle pasture, end of the line.”

“I’ll call my former boss,” Miss Blunt said. “Maybe he can pick us up... but first we have to get out of here.”

“Where to?” asked Pete.

Miss Blunt pointed to a side road a few metres away from them that led to a small grove. Colourful lights flickered above the treetops. Now Pete also heard the bass of the music and he spotted a sign that said ‘Paradise Resort’.

“A holiday resort,” Miss Blunt said with satisfaction. “Pete, you get the bags out of the boot and then we’ll walk there quickly.”

“I don’t like walking,” Quinn complained.

“If we stay here, I’m sure you’ll get to meet your nice friends soon,” Miss Blunt said.

When Pete had brought the two bags out, Miss Blunt got out of the car and told him to keep an eye on Quinn. She then rummaged in one of her bags, brought out a second Taser and handed it to Pete. “Take this and give me back the stun gun. The Taser is more useful now. Just be careful if you need to use it.”

“What?” Pete exclaimed.

Ignoring Pete’s surprise, Miss Blunt opened the car door and dragged Mr Quinn out of the car. Then she led him like a dog on a leash, which he complained every few metres.

They hurried towards the lights and the sounds until they had crossed the small grove and came to a fenced-in area. Next to a car park stood a flat, white wooden building. Despite the time of day, the reception was still lighted up. A poster next to the entrance announced that the resort was hosting an annual retreat of an insurance company.

“Shall we go in?” asked Pete.

Miss Blunt shook her head. “No, only if there is danger.” She pulled out her mobile phone, but lowered it again a moment later. “My battery is flat.”

“Now what?”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to ask for help after all,” Miss Blunt said reluctantly.

She knocked on the glass door to the foyer. An athletic, tanned man appeared and unlocked it. He stared at them in surprise. Pete didn’t think that was surprising. After all, the man certainly rarely received leashed people in handcuffs. Miss Blunt also presented an unusual picture. She was still wearing the zombie hunter outfit.

The man quickly regained his composure. “Good evening! How can I help you?”

“I have arrested this man on behalf of a bail enforcement agency. However, our car broke down on the road. I’d like to make a phone call.”

“This woman abducted me,” Mr Quinn said, glancing at the employee’s name tag. “You can’t imagine, Cody, that she even had this poor kid drive us for hours.”

The man called Cody now looked a little confused again.

“We’ll get to the main issues in a moment.” Miss Blunt remained calm and held up her ID card. “Everything is in order. Before that, however, I urgently need to call my contact at the company that deals with the authorities.”

“You’re welcome,” said Cody. Curiously, he eyed the prisoner. “So you’re a real criminal.”

“That’s just what this unfriendly lady claimed,” Quinn objected.

“And you?” the staff member asked, addressing Pete.

The Second Investigator stood next to the entrance counter with the two bags and didn't quite know what to say.

Miss Blunt beat him to it. "I'll explain everything in a moment, but first I need a phone."

"As you wish." Cody reached across the counter and brought out a cordless handset.

For a moment, Miss Blunt was distracted. Pete couldn't blame her. The woman had been on the job for hours.

Suddenly, Quinn yanked violently on the chain, causing the teacher to lose her balance. A second jerk and Quinn was free. Already he was sprinting through the foyer. Pete dropped the bags and immediately gave chase, but he stood too far away to catch the loose end of the chain. Quinn reached the door that led to the outside area. Before he crossed it, he knocked over a potted palm tree to block Pete's way.

The Second Investigator avoided the obstacle by jumping over the pot. He caught up as Quinn ran down a sloping lawn to a lake. There the party was in full swing. At least a hundred guests were celebrating on the water's edge. A band was playing a party hit.

Quinn gathered the chain and rushed past the lake—away from the resort guests.

The Second Investigator was in his element. His legs literally flew over the grass.

"Hey," someone called out to him from the water. "You're not allowed here—"

Pete ran on until he reached the end of the lake. In the moonlight, he spotted a few chalets, bushes and behind them a high fence that surrounded the holiday resort... but where had Quinn gone?

The next moment, a scream sounded.

"Hey, what are you doing here?" A man's voice thundered through the night. It came from one of the chalets.

"No offence. I'm out of here." That was Quinn!

The diving leap Pete made would have made a puma jealous. In seconds, the Second Investigator was over Quinn. He pulled the man to the ground and grabbed the metal chain that was still attached to the handcuffs and the restraint belt.

Quinn pulled his knee up and rammed it into Pete's stomach. He hadn't been able to get much momentum, but it still hurt the Second Investigator. Pete groaned but did not let go of the chain.

"Let me go!" begged Quinn urgently.

"I can't do that," Pete said. "You are wanted by the police."

"It's not just about me." Quinn's expression had changed. Pete thought he recognized honest desperation. "I've put someone in danger and I need to do something urgently."

"Why are you only now telling me this?" asked Pete sceptically.

"Because your ruthless teacher probably wouldn't care. I escaped in the first place because—"

"Hello?" someone called from behind.

"Let me go," Quinn whispered. "Please!"

But someone was already leaning over them. "This area is reserved for our guests."

Pete looked up. It was Cody, the receptionist. Mr Quinn let himself sink to the ground with a loud groan.

"I have caught the fugitive," Pete explained. Miss Blunt would be relieved but the Second Investigator felt no triumph. The fear in Quinn's eyes was etched in his memory.

## 15. Ruthless Snake

More than two and a half hours had passed since the last stop. The Partymobile urgently needed to be refuelled, but Bob doesn't have any money.

However, Lyn continued to be optimistic. "I'll take care of it," she said with a smile as she turned into a petrol station. "You take care of our passenger and I'll take care of the rest."

"If you say so." Bob said. He turned around and saw that Odo was snoring blissfully in the back seat. Then Lyn jumped casually out of the car with her backpack.

The effect of the drug on Bob had completely worn off and he was caught up with all his worries and concerns. He decided to keep an eye on Lyn, so he turned the knob that adjusted the side mirror. When he found the right position, he could see Lyn's reflection. As she filled up, she rifled through her backpack. It looked clumsy and Lyn looked rushed. With trembling hands, she tugged a clear plastic bag out. It was packed with bundles of something.

Bob was puzzled. Were those banknotes? Like... many bundles of cash? It almost looked like it. Then Lyn fiddled in the bag and took something out. Nervously, she stuffed the bulky bag back into her backpack.

After filling the petrol, Lyn proceeded to the petrol station shop to pay. It was high time for Bob to move the mirror back. Then he slid back into the passenger seat in confusion.

What was going on here? Lyn had been friendly and helpful—perhaps a little too helpful. She had something that looked like bundles of banknotes in her backpack. What was she up to? She also did have a velvet bag with her earlier. Where was it?

Wait a minute! She left her velvet bag in the footwell. Bob took a quick look at the shop. Lyn was still at the counter paying. Then he quickly snatched the velvet bag and opened it. There was no wallet, only a bunch of envelopes. Bob took a look at them.

The pick-up slowed down. The First Investigator jolted up from a restless half-sleep. By now everything hurt him. The long drive along SR-99 and then the country roads had been an ordeal.

Finally, the pick-up stopped, and silence fell for a moment. Before long, gravel crunched and footsteps came rapidly closer.

"Hey, Brutus! How did that go wrong?" Jupiter heard Nancy shout out.

Then a male voice called out: "They made me crash my car! My car is ruined!"

"I was counting on you to get the MG."

"I did—almost."

"Almost? You blew the job!" Nancy scolded. "Don't think I'm paying you."

"Look! My car is gone," the man called Brutus was indignant. "I really need money now."

"There's still a last chance for you. My partner is down and I need someone to cover me," Nancy said. "Can you handle a gun?"

"I'm a top marksman."

"Get in."

A door rattled. Nancy started the engine and sped off.

A short time later, however, she stopped again. The driver's door opened. Nancy got out, walked back a little and cursed. "That's the MG! It's abandoned! They've escaped."

"Now what?" Brutus asked.

"We're going on. I just have to gag someone first so that he doesn't spoil our nice surprise."

So Jupiter spent the last part of the way bound and gagged on the hard surface of the cargo area. The minutes dragged on like hours. The moon still shone bright and clear in the dark sky.

Jupiter's head ached almost worse than his back by now. As the pick-up pulled off the road onto a dirt track, it became almost unbearable. Then finally the vehicle came to a stop.

Nancy got out. "Brutus, you stay here. Make sure the boy doesn't run away. If I don't come back in ten minutes... come and look for me."

An animal howled in the distance, then it was quiet again. Jupiter winced as an old-fashioned doorbell rang. Nothing happened for quite a while. Then a deep voice called out: "Do you know what time it is?"

"Nice greeting," Nancy replied. "I'm a friend of Burt Newman's. Actually, I was coming to meet him regarding the rodeo, but my car broke down. I was on the road for hours."

"Mr Newman is not here," said the male voice.

"Please don't tell me I came all the way here for nothing."

"I'm afraid so."

Nancy groaned. "Can I wait for him?"

"No," the man replied. "I don't know you and I have to get to work in a few hours' time. Drive your truck down the road a bit. There's an old barn where you can spend the night."

"You're trying to get rid of me," Nancy said coolly. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing at all," the man said. "I'm just looking after the ranch."

"Where's Burt?"

"He's away on business."

"You're limping," Nancy ventured. "From a fight?"

"An accident. It happens on a ranch."

"Well," Nancy said unusually sweetly. "Then I'll just leave Burt a note. I've got a pen and paper with me. Just a minute... I'll have it..."

"Whatever," the man growled. Then his voice changed abruptly. "Hey! Put the gun down or—"

"Shut up!" Nancy commanded. "Now come with me."

"Who are you and what do you want?" the man asked.

"I said shut up and step out of the house now!" Nancy ordered.

There was a moment of silence, and then Jupe heard some footsteps and rustling of bushes.

Suddenly, a gunshot shattered the silence of the night. Something clattered. A horse whinnied in panic.

The next moment, Jupe heard Nancy running back to the pick-up.

Brutus opened the door and asked: "What happened?"

"What? Are you deaf? I shot him!" She sounded a little out of breath.

"Who is he?" Brutus asked.

"The sticker on his car's bumper gave him away. I presume that's his car out front. He's from Colystone Recovery. Bounty hunting is over for him. I hate to say it, but a shot through the heart is fatal!"



Bob saw Pete's MG on the side of the road. "Pull over!"

"What is it?" asked Lyn in surprise.

"That is my friend's car!"

They both got out and hurried to the MG. Concerned, Lyn stroked the deep scratches in the paintwork. "Something's happened here!"

Bob was fed up with lies and deception. The false game had to be stopped. Lyn was peering through one of the windows into the interior of the car when Bob approached her from behind and tapped her shoulder.

"What is it?" she asked, startled.

"You lied!" Bob held an envelope in front of her. It was a bank statement he had found in Lyn's velvet bag.

"Where did you get that?" she asked in amazement.

"I'm asking the questions here, Janis Lynette Quinn," Bob said.

"You took this envelope from my bag!" Lyn cried.

"I'm asking the questions," Bob repeated. "Our investigation is about a fraudster named Quinn! That's your last name too. Are you a con artist as well?"

"No!" Lyn objected. "I'm not part of the Prairie Gang. I'm whom they called the Pup."

"The Coyote's Pup that Odo was talking about?"

She nodded. "Scott Lawrence Quinn is my father. I actually live with my grandparents in San Diego, but then Snake found out about me and threatened my father."

"How did she track you down?"

"She got hold of a photo of me that Dad was carrying. That's why I did not let Bison see me earlier in case he recognizes me. However, Dad has no idea how they got my address."

"I thought Odo said Snake was bluffing. I guess she just had the photo and then tried her luck. After all, she's a con artist who fools people all the time."

"If she was really bluffing, then Dad ran away for nothing... and... and I also brought the loot along for nothing."

"The loot of a lot of money?"

She nodded. "I took the money out of hiding yesterday and went to see Dad in Port Hueneme."

"What were you planning to do?" Bob asked.

"Dad actually wanted to pay off the rest of them, but then he had an idea. The handover was to be a trap for Snake and Bison. He even wanted to get the police involved, but it never came to that. Snake found out that Dad was in Port Hueneme, but before she got to him, my father was abducted. A boy tried to stop it. I was there and saw everything."

"You were at the construction site?"

"Yes, but none of them saw me. After they all left in such a hurry in that maze of roads, I knew I lost their trail. So, I did not know what to do. A little later, you and your friend came, followed by Snake and Bison."

"And then you followed us to Lost Hills?"

"Yes," Lyn confirmed, "but I did tell you a fib that my motorbike was out of fuel. I need all the help I can get to rescue my father."

Bob's eyes widen. "You could have intervened when Snake abducted my friend."

"I saw that she had a gun. How could I match up to her?" Lyn stared at the MG. Tears came to her eyes. "After all, this is about my father. Do you think Snake got him? Look at the state of this car."

"We'll find out," Bob said. He tried to sound confident, but did not succeed convincingly. "Okay, Lyn. Your dad and my friends could be in serious danger right now."

We need to work together to see how we can rescue them... but first, what else have you not told me?"

"Uh... yes, my mobile phone is working fine."

"Now why didn't you let me use your phone earlier?"

"I can't be sure that you will not call the police," Lyn cried. "If the police interferes and messes things up, my dad might be harmed."

"Okay, okay," Bob said placatingly. He was sympathetic to Lyn's predicament. "—But now it is different. It's not far to the Burning Dawn Ranch. Hopefully we'll find out more there."

"Okay," Lyn sniffled.

"I'll help you," Bob promised. "However, we may eventually have to call the police."

She nodded. "I know. The main thing is that nothing happens to Dad."

"Deal," said Bob, "and now we're going snake hunting!"

## 16. Burning Dawn

“Come with me now,” Nancy told Brutus. “I need your help!” She sounded extremely nervous. “Come on!”

“What about the boy?”

“He’s the least of our problems. Come on, move your butt!”

The passenger door slammed shut. Heavy footsteps moved away. A door rattled. After that, only the chirping of crickets and the scattered snorting of horses could be heard. Jupiter suppressed his pain and mobilized all his strength.

During the journey, escape had been out of the question. Now there was no other way out. Nancy had clearly shown that she was ready to clear any obstacle out of the way—even if those obstacles were people. However, she was exhausted and under pressure. In such a state, one made mistakes. One of them was that when she tied the First Investigator’s hands and ankles, she did not search his back pockets, for he had a Swiss Army knife there.

Jupiter’s hands reached into his pocket and fished out the knife. He opened the blades and worked his way to cut the tape that bound his wrists. As soon as his hands were free, he removed the gag and the tape around his ankles.

Quietly, he climbed down from pick-up’s cargo area and looked around. He couldn’t see much because a cloud was just moving in front of the moon. Apparently he was on the forecourt of a ranch, to his left in front of him was an old dwelling house with a verandah. A small lamp shone beside the front door. Moths were buzzing around it.

But first, he had to check on the man. He went round to the bushes on the side of the house, and very soon, saw the body of the man. He was tall and very powerfully built.

The man was lying on his side. His head had landed on a flowerpot. The pot had broken and the man was bleeding from the forehead. Jupe bent down even further. The man was breathing! His chest rose and fell slowly, without a sound. This surprised Jupiter because Nancy had said that she shot the man in the heart.

Jupiter took a deep breath. He courageously turned the man on his back. It did not take long before he had certainty. Underneath the man’s jacket was a bulletproof vest! The impact of the bullet had brought him down, causing him to hit his head on the pot and lose consciousness. He might have had a concussion, but not a fatal wound. Jupiter was considering what first aid measures were appropriate when he heard voices coming from the house through the open door.

“That guy locked me up! If you hadn’t come—”

“Shut up, Possum!” That was Nancy. “You told that bail enforcement agent where Coyote was.”

“He showed up here and threatened me,” the man defended himself. “I am the victim, and yeah, talking about being a victim, I found the tracking device one of you planted in my car!”

“You’re smarter than you look,” Nancy said. “Although it was very stupid to show up at the rodeo. That’s where you were spotted and I tracked you here, as did that bail enforcement agent. So it’s thanks to you that I found Coyote; though it’s also thanks to you that he was caught by that bounty hunter.”

“I—”

“Has Coyote turned up here yet?”

“No, only that bail enforcement guy,” Possum said. “He locked me in there, and then waited here for his partner to come. I don’t know where he is now.”

“The man is dead.”

“Dead?” Possum asked in horror.

“He’s outside by the bushes,” said Brutus.

A horse in the stable neighed excitedly. A crash followed.

Possum groaned. “The stallion needs a sedative. He’s going to freak me out because—”

“Quiet!” Nancy warned.

The sound of hooves could be heard in the distance.

“We’re going to have visitors. Everybody do as I say now!”

The path led over a moonlit gravel track. Miss Blunt was sitting on a black mare, pulling Mr Quinn’s horse behind her by the lead rope. He sat well tied up on the back of a pinto horse. Pete himself rode a bay gelding with Miss Blunt’s two black bags strapped on the saddle. It seemed as if he had landed in the Wild West in every respect.

The helpful Cody had loaned them what he called ‘good-natured animals’ from the stables of Paradise Resort and shown them a trail that led through the prairie to Burning Dawn Ranch.

Low bushes lined the trail. Pete had overcome his tiredness and he felt more awake and focussed now. That was how he had come up with the idea of using the piece of blue chalk he always carried with him—and his maths notebook. He had taken the notebook out of his backpack, torn several pages out, and drew a large blue question mark on it. Since he rode behind the others, he leaned out of the saddle to pierce a piece onto tree branches at regular intervals.

Just then he rode past a weathered sign that read: ‘Burning Dawn Ranch—B. Newman’. Pete left a blue question mark on it.

A collapsed wall appeared in front of him, then a pick-up truck, a car, and a building that must have been a good hundred years past its best days. The ranch was a strange combination of junkyard, ruin and farm. The outbuildings were ancient and dilapidated.

A horse greeted them with an excited neigh, followed by hooves ramming against the stable walls. The horses from the resort were not fazed by this. They were really very calm animals.

“We don’t ride all the way to the house,” Miss Blunt decided. She pointed to a group of low trees. “Better to tie up the horses under the cover of darkness and get a picture of the situation.”

“I hope so,” Quinn whispered. “I believe Snake should already be here.”

Pete slipped out of the saddle. At that moment, he heard a bird call echoed through the night. Miss Blunt and Mr Quinn paid no attention to it, but an almost electric crackle ran through Pete.

It was the call of the Red-bellied Flycatcher—a secret call that The Three Investigators used to warn each other inconspicuously. In this case, Pete knew that at least one of his fellow investigators was here! He couldn’t see anyone around, so they had to be hiding somewhere.

“We have to be careful,” said the Second Investigator quietly. “Something is wrong.”

“I’m afraid so,” said Mr Quinn.

Pete, who had already tied up his horse, looked around for a place to hide. Now was the time to let Miss Blunt do as she pleased. This was clearly an equation with too many unknowns and either Jupe or Bob had warned him. It was time to look for them. Without consulting his travelling companions, Pete sneaked off among bushes.

Jupiter had crawled under the verandah and pressed himself onto the sandy ground under the floorboards. Tactically, it was a good hiding place. He could eavesdrop on the others without being seen.

Nancy had stepped off the verandah and was walking towards the gate. Who had arrived with the horses? Pete perhaps? Jupiter had to risk it. He gathered all his courage and trilled the call of the Red-bellied Flycatcher. After that it was frighteningly quiet until Nancy and the arrivals met halfway.

“Good of you to come.” That was Nancy.

“Who are you?” came unmistakably from Miss Blunt.

“I work for Coltstone Recovery and I’m supposed to take Mr Quinn.”

“Baloney!” said a male voice. “Even Goldilocks is more realistic than this fairy tale. She is—”

“You stay out of this, Quinn!” Nancy interrupted. “You make your money through fraud and deceit but you don’t fool me.”

“This is an ambush,” the same man said, and Jupe figured that that should be Quinn.

“Show me your ID,” Miss Blunt demanded.

“Yes, in a moment,” Nancy replied. “Wait...”

The First Investigator had to do something, but first, he had to get out from under the verandah!

“I’d like to see your ID right away,” was the last Jupiter heard of the conversation.

A thick cloud moved in front of the moon. The First Investigator didn’t know afterwards exactly how he had so silently scurried out from hiding under the verandah. At breakneck speed, under the cover of darkness, he crept along the house to a bush. There he turned and sprinted to behind a stable.

Just as he was about to catch his breath in relief, someone grabbed him by the shoulder.

## 17. *Western Revenge... In Real Life*

“Jupe!” Pete was so happy to see his friend. Jupe, however, stared at him for a moment as if he were a monster.

“Are you all right?” the Second Investigator asked quietly.

Jupiter gasped, then nodded in relief. “Miss Blunt has just been ambushed.” In terse words, he told the Second Investigator what he had witnessed. “That man Nancy shot is still alive,” Jupiter concluded the hurried summary. “—But he is unconscious.”

“Where is Bob?”

“He should still be sleeping in my pink Partymobile,” Jupiter said gloomily, “in Lost Hills.”

Pete didn’t quite understand this at all, but Jupiter did not have time to explain it to him. Instead, the First Investigator insisted on scouting out the situation immediately.

The forecourt was now empty. Everyone had gone inside. The two boys stalked the building and the First Investigator peered through a ground floor window. He cursed softly.

“What is it?” Pete stretched and looked into the house as well. Miss Blunt, Mr Quinn and another man were made to sit against a wall. Standing opposite them was a dark-haired woman with a gun in her hand.

Through the closed windows, they could barely hear the conversation in the room. Then they heard Miss Blunt say something that sounded like “left at the resort”. That could be about Pete.

“The one with the gun is Nancy,” Jupiter whispered, “but I can’t see her accomplice.”

“Maybe he’s looking for you.” Pete looked around nervously. There was no one to be seen.

“Probably... which means that he will be going out to the pick-up over there.” The First Investigator pressed himself close to the wall of the house.

“We have to get help,” Pete said barely audibly. “I’ll ride back to the holiday resort where we got the horses from.”

Appropriate to the keyword ‘horses’, the stallion in the stable neighed. Then he banged against the wall of the stall as if he wanted to bring down the stable.

At that very moment, the two boys heard someone running back to the house.

“That should be Brutus, the accomplice,” Jupe said. “He’s now going to report to Nancy that I am missing from the pick-up. When he comes back out, I have to lure him away... otherwise he’ll catch you before you get away. Anyway, now’s the time for you to go!”

As quiet as possible and under the cover of darkness, Pete ran off.

Not a moment too soon, Brutus was back outside, circling the house. Obviously Nancy had instructed him to look for the First Investigator.

Jupiter crept into the stable. The little light coming in from the windows was sufficient for the First Investigator to make out the layout of the stable.

The stallion snorted furiously, seemingly wanting to escape from his stall at any cost. An idea came to Jupiter to take advantage of that. He found the light switch, switched it on and quickly looked around. Then he climbed up to the hayloft directly above the stall of the black horse.

“Help!” Jupiter yelled at the top of his lungs. “Help! Get me away from the horse! Help!” The stallion continued to snort furiously.

It wasn’t long before Brutus rushed into the stable. He looked around, discovered a bridle on the ground in front of the stall and drew the wrong conclusion—just as Jupiter had hoped.

“You’re not going to get away on this horse!” the man shouted. “Come on out!”

He tried to peek into the stall, but the stallion reared up and banged his hooves against the wood. Brutus backed away.

“Where are you?” he shouted. With one hand, the man held a gun, with the other he pushed the sliding door of the stall a bit aside to peek inside. The gap was not large, but the horse had realized that there was a way out to freedom.

Before Brutus could slide the door back, the horse had pushed his head through the gap. With just a nudge with his head, the sliding door slid open wider. Brutus could only quickly jump for cover when the black horse broke out of the stall with a mighty leap and galloped towards the open stable gate.

Jupiter realized that it was high time to do something about it. Normally, he solved his problems with brains. This time, his weight also came to his aid. What he did next was unprecedented.

The First Investigator flung himself out of the hayloft directly onto the man, bringing him down to the ground. It was like a pro-wrestler leaping off the top turnbuckle with an outstretched elbow ramming onto the opponent. The only thing missing was the referee getting down to make the three-count.

Lyn stopped the Partymobile. Bob had spotted another piece of paper pierced on a tree branch. It was clearly another clue from Pete. The blue chalk question mark left no doubt.

Despite his exhaustion, Bob had to grin. The sloppy handwriting on paper revealed that it was a page out of Pete’s maths notebook. How often had the Second Investigator announced that he was going to tear up his school work. So far he had never done it. Now, of all times, it was going to come in handy. Without the clues, Bob and Lyn would never have found the last part of their way to the ranch so quickly.

“Wait! There’s someone coming!” Lyn slowed down.

Now Bob could also see what Lyn meant. A rider on a horse was coming towards them.

“What should we do?” she asked uncertainly.

Bob paused. Then the clouds released the full moon. “That’s Pete!”

“What?”

“Lyn, stop the car!” Bob called out and then yanked open the door. “Pete!”

“Bob!” Pete urged the horse on and was beside the Partymobile in a moment. “Do you have a mobile phone with you?”

“What kind of greeting is that?” asked Bob.

“We have to call the police,” Pete urged. “It’s serious!”

Bob looked at Lyn. “Now’s the time to call...”

Lyn just nodded and took her phone out of her backpack. Bob made the call while Pete vigilantly observed the surroundings.

It took Bob quite a while to report. Then he passed the phone to Pete who described the rest. Bob and Lyn listened tensely. What the Second Investigator reported did not sound good. Lyn was visibly frightened and looked like she was about to cry.

“Thank you,” Pete finally said.

“Snake has a hold on the others,” Bob said as Pete handed the phone back to Lyn.

"She's ruthless," Pete looked around again. "Help is on the way, but it will take time for the sheriff and his men to get here."

"Then we have to do something!" Lyn cried. "I'm not waiting for something to happen to Dad."

"We could hand the money to Snake," Bob said. "That will stall her."

Pete shook his head. "No. If she has the loot, she will get rid of all the witnesses. We can't risk that."

Lyn looked at him in despair.

"—But we have an advantage," Pete said. "Snake doesn't know we're here or where we are. I have a plan."

He took down both of Miss Blunt's bags that were hanging from the bay gelding's saddle, opened the smaller one and took out Miss Blunt's spare vest. Then he opened the larger bag and grabbed two pairs of handcuffs.

Bob was confused as he saw Pete putting on the vest and then stuffing the handcuffs and something else into the front lower pocket.

"Uh... what do you have there?" Bob asked.

"Don't worry," said the Second Investigator, noticing Bob's surprised look. "It's just like playing a video game... *Western Revenge*... in real life!"

"Okay," Bob said with relief. "I guess you know what you are doing."

"Hope so," Pete replied. "I've got no time to lose..."

The moon slowly became paler. The first glimmer on the horizon told them that daybreak was not far away.

Pete may not have been a high-flyer at school, but now he was in his element. Silent as a cat, he shimmied up to the verandah of the house. He tried to open the main door, but it was locked. Out came his lock picks and a moment later, he was inside the house.

Just as silently, he made his way around the ground floor. He had to get to the living room—the location of which he roughly knew, after having seen it through the window earlier. Then he heard voices. He paused in his movement, listened and then continued on his way.

Finally he found the living room. A warm glow of light came through the ajar door out to the dark hallway. Snake was apparently still standing near the door. That suited Pete very well. When the signal came, he had to be quick. He took up an alert position. A clock ticked monotonously. A fly buzzed.

"Are you waiting for your henchman?" a question from Mr Quinn sounded from the living room.

"It's none of your business," said Snake.

"Let me guess," Quinn continued. "It's not going the way you planned."

"I'd be quiet if I were you."

"You need me to get the money... but when I'm injured or stressed, I can't remember where it is."

"You will remember," said Snake, "but I have to first deal with these troublesome wit—"

Suddenly, she was interrupted by loud dance music blaring in the forecourt. Bright disco lights started flashing into the living room. Unlike Snake, Pete knew exactly what that meant. The Partymobile had come alive and Bob had the disco sound system turned up full blast.

It was like surfing when Pete's body took over... or like sprinting when his legs gave everything to get to the finish line... or like basketball when his hands held the ball for a



three-pointer to win the game in the final seconds...

In one fluid motion, Pete kicked open the door, stormed in with both hands clutching the Taser, took aim, and pulled the trigger without hesitation. Amidst the over-driven bass of a bad disco hit, Snake flinched. Then she sank to her knees. Her gun fell from her hand as she collapsed face-first on the floor.

“Well, whaddya know,” said Mr Quinn. “Spider-Boy has just taken down a snake!”

## 18. The Aftermath

The sheriff and his deputy were astonished when they arrived at the ranch in one squad car. Three boys, who introduced themselves as investigators from Rocky Beach, handed over several criminals and the loot to him.

The officers had their hands full handling the situation so they had to call for reinforcements as well as an ambulance for Vince Coltstone.

The Prairie Gang members were handcuffed and detained in the living room. Brutus, who was Snake's accomplice, but not part of the gang, was led out from the stable to join the rest. Tied up with horse halters, he was limping slightly and groaning theatrically. Pete suspected that he would remember every single kilo of Jupiter 'Jackhammer' Jones for a long time.

The Three Investigators had to be very satisfied with their achievement. Through their individual and collective efforts, they managed to take down the entire Prairie Gang.

In the meantime, the sheriff needed someone to explain to him what went on. As Jupiter, Pete, Bob, and Miss Blunt were separated in some stage of the journey here, none of them had a complete picture of what had happened. Now was the opportunity for all to understand the situation as they took turns to brief the sheriff. Lyn joined in to fill in the missing pieces as she had nothing to lose since her father was safe.

Miss Blunt started by presenting the sheriff with the police wanted notice, and her role in this mission. Lyn explained that her father had given her the loot for safe-keeping and his intention to set a trap for Snake and Bison. Bob then reported on what he had got out from Bison, while Jupe and Pete described the ending stages of the whole saga. As expected, the sheriff found it quite hard to grasp the situation as he had no prior knowledge of it.

Eventually, a Sheriff's Department van arrived with three more deputies. Snake, Bison, Possum and Brutus were led into the van. Lyn had pleaded with the sheriff for her to be with her father and the sheriff had agreed to take both of them in his squad car.

"Now we have them all," announced a deputy sheriff.

"Seems so," marvelled the sheriff, rubbing his enormous moustache.

As the van moved off, Mr Quinn the Coyote was led out of the house. Lyn had tears in her eyes, but her father smiled at her.

"No need to cry! You are out of danger now. That's all that matters. Besides, I have much less to fear in court than Snake."

"Indeed," Lyn said.

"My wonderful girl. I hope one day, you can come and live with me here in Sacramento... Meanwhile, say hello to my lovely in-laws!"

"—But you can't stand them," Lyn said.

"Thank goodness, you could..." Quinn replied, "at least for now!"

Now Lyn had to laugh after all. She sounded relieved.

Before Mr Quinn got into the sheriff's car, he turned to Pete. "Thanks, Spider-Boy. That was a straight A!"

"For once, I have to agree with him," said Miss Blunt, who was standing next to the Second Investigator. "I don't know how this would have turned out without you—the three of you, for that matter."

“Who knows?” Pete said quietly.

Without the intervention of The Three Investigators, the criminals would probably not have found out where Miss Blunt had taken Quinn. On the other hand, they would still be at large and Lyn would be alone in Port Hueneme with the loot.

As it was, things did turn out very differently. This was exactly the chaos theory Mr Quinn had talked about—uncertainty and unpredictably will always be a constant in life. However, The Three Investigators had mastered it and the criminals had been arrested. With this realization, the Second Investigator concluded the thought.

Just then, two paramedics carried Miss Blunt’s former boss on a stretcher to the ambulance. Vince Colystone had regained consciousness but had suffered a concussion. He would be taken to hospital as a precaution.

“He was on the right side of the law,” Miss Blunt said thoughtfully, “but he’s still a bad boss. He paid my family’s debts and I worked for him until I finally got my dream job as a teacher.”

Jupiter turned to Miss Blunt. “—But may I ask why you were out bounty hunting again?”

“I still owed him an assignment,” she said. “He had just caught Newman and learned from him where Quinn was. Port Hueneme is not only far away though, but in all likelihood, Snake would have got to Quinn before him. That’s why he asked me to stand in for him.”

“Plausible,” Jupiter said. “What’s more, Mr Colystone was injured before being shot. Why was that?”

“There was probably a fight with Newman. He was going to turn him in to the authorities along with Quinn. That’s why he locked Newman up and guarded him.”

“Aha! So just before that, Newman still managed to warn Quinn. We listened to his voicemail message on Quinn’s mobile phone. However, Newman was caught by Mr Colystone before he could finish.”

“I guess this is the last job you will do for him then,” Pete remarked. “Maths is safer, don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Miss Blunt replied. “There is one more thing for Vince. I’ll let him have a few days to recover before I send him an estimate for the repairs to our cars.”

“I’ll get you an estimate for my MG,” Pete said. “He won’t like the figures though.”

“You know what, Pete?” Miss Blunt continued. “You certainly have what it takes to be a bounty hunter. It would be an alternative to college.”

“No way!” Pete waved it off. “Before I abduct or stun someone, I’d rather be a cheerleader and jump for a scholarship.”

Miss Blunt looked at him encouragingly. “I’ll get you a good tutor for maths and make sure you catch up in class. That should be enough.”

“Thank you!” Pete remarked in surprise.

“We still have a lot to do at the Sheriff’s Department,” Miss Blunt reflected, “but first, I’m going to find us some accommodation. We all need some sleep before we put our statements on record.”

“Well, there is a holiday resort here,” Pete said. “Besides, we have to bring the horses back to Cody.”

Completely exhausted, The Three Investigators and Miss Blunt made their way to Paradise Resort.

Pete volunteered to ride the bay gelding and lead the two ‘good-natured horses’ back. He had had enough of driving, let alone being in a vehicle.

Bob drove the pink Partymobile with Miss Blunt giving him directions to the resort. The owner of the Partymobile sat at the back seat pondering by himself.

The last saviour of this ordeal was Cody. He had arranged a chalet to house his four unexpected guests.

As Pete lay on the bed facing the window, the sun was rising in the east. The red ball of fire drove away the night. The chalets in the resort looked as if they were on fire, but Pete hardly noticed any of it. He yawned profusely. It had been a long night—a night of hunting, of escape, of prisoners and rescuers.

Finally, his eyes fell shut. Only one thought floated through his head before he fell asleep: “We have solved the case!”

## Addendum

SMS from Kelly to Pete—Friday, 7:30 pm

*Where are you?*

SMS from Kelly to Pete—Friday, 8:04 pm

*We have a date!*

SMS from Kelly to Pete—Friday, 9:45 pm

*I've had enough of this! Are you investigating with Jupe and Bob? Why are they always more important than me?*

SMS from Kelly to Pete—Friday, 10:37 pm

*It's over! For real this time!*

SMS from Pete to Kelly—Saturday, 1:12 pm

*I had to do something for school—maths and stuff. For real!*

SMS from Kelly to Pete—Saturday, 1:14 pm

*Maths?*

SMS from Pete to Kelly—Saturday, 1:17 pm

*Equations with several unknowns. Tomorrow, I'll take you out for ice cream and explain everything. Oh yes! You want to buy a car? Got something here. It's a conversion van and it's pretty cool. And guess what? It's pink!*